Bringing the soldier back in

Russian military manning, manpower, and mobilisation in the light of Russia's war in Ukraine

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Cover: Military oath of the Presidential Regiment of the Service of Moscow Kremlin's Commandant of the Federal Guard Service (December 2017).

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Jonas Kjellén, Author

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Sammanfattning

Första året av Rysslands fullskaliga invasion av Ukraina har kantats av ryska misslyckanden med omfattande militära förluster till följd. Mot bakgrund av Rysslands militära modernisering samt ett flertal förhållandevis framgångsrika militära operationer under 2010-talet är svårigheterna överraskande. Rapporten studerar hur Ryssland militära bemanningsstruktur och personalförsörjning har utvecklats sedan Sovjetunionens kollaps och om dessa aspekter kan förklara Rysslands militära misslyckanden i Ukraina. Bilden som framträder är att militärreformen, som inleddes 2009, innebar en närapå fullständig avveckling av den militära struktur som ärvdes från Sovjetunionen – däribland det omfattande militära logistiksystemet samt förmågan att skala upp den militära organisationen genom mobilisering. I motsats till den allmänna uppfattningen, var Rysslands moderniserade väpnade styrkor inte utformade för ett utdraget och storskaligt krig mitt i Europa – det vill säga den typ av krig som Rysslands invasion av Ukraina utvecklats till.

Nyckelord: Ryssland, väpnade styrkorna, bemanning, värnplikt, rekrytering, mobilisering, militärtjänstgörande, officer, kontraktssoldat, patriotism, prizyvnik, kontraktnik, mobilizatsija.

Summary

The first year of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has been ridden with Russian failures and massive military losses. Considering the primacy of military modernisation during the 2010s and several successful military operations conducted, the underperformance of Russia's Armed Forces is surprising. The report analyses how Russian military manning structure and strategies have evolved in the post-Soviet period, and how this can explain Russia's military failure in Ukraine. The picture that emerges is that the military reform, initiated in 2009, meticulously and finally dismantled the military structure inherited from the Soviet Union, including much of the formerly vast military logistical apparatus and the capability to scale up the military structure through mobilisation. Contrary to conventional wisdom, Russia's Armed Forces was in early 2022 in no position to fight a protracted, large-scale war in Central Europe, as its invasion of Ukraine rapidly became.

Keywords: Russia, armed forces, manning, conscription, recruitment, retention, mobilisation, servicemen, officer, contract soldier, patriotism, prizyvnik, kontraktnik, mobilizatsiya.

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Abbreviations

BARS	Combat Army Reserve (*boevoe armeiskii rezerv strany*)
BTG	Battalion tactical group
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPI	Corruption Perceptions Index
DOSAAF	Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy (*dobrovolnoe obshchestvo sodeistvie armii, aviatsii i flotu Rossii*)
DPR	Donetsk People's Republic
Ed.	Edited by
Eng.	English
GOMU	Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate of the General Staff (*Glavnoe organizatsionno-mobilizatsionnoe upravlenie Generalnogo shtaba Vooruzhennykh Sil Rossiiskoi Federatsii)*
GPV	State Armament Programme (*gosudarstvennaia programma vooruzheniia*)
HRMMU	Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine
IT	Information technology
JSC	Joint strategic command
KIA	Killed in action
KMB	Basic military training course (*kurs mologogo boitsa*)
LPR	Luhansk People's Republic
MChS	Ministry of Emergency Situations *(Ministerstvo RF po delam grazhdanskoi oborony, chrezvychainym situatsiiam i likvidatsii posledstvii stikhiinykh bedstvii)*
MD	Military district
MoD	Ministry of defence
MP	Mobilisation plan (*mobilizatsionnyi plan*)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCO	Non-commissioned officer
PMC	Private military company
ROSTO	Russian Defence Sports-Technical Organisation (*Rossiiskaia oboronnaia sportivno-tekhnicheskaia organizatsiia*)
RT	Russia Today (Russian news television network)
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VTsIOM	Russian Public Opinion Research Centre (*Vserossiiskii tsentr izucheniia obshchestvennogo mneniia*)
VUS	Military speciality (*voenno-uchetnaia spetsialnost*)
WWII	Second World War

1 Introduction

A paradox exposed by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine is the starting point of this report: while Russia has in recent years expended huge resources to modernise its armed forces in all imaginable ways, it has nevertheless failed so disastrously to achieve its military objectives and suffered great losses on the battlefield. The explanations offered range from military specifics, such as serious flaws in Russian battle-tank design, to more intangible ones, such as delusional beliefs and hubris among the Russian leadership. Many of the shortcomings of the Russian army showcased during the first year of the war seem, however, related in one way or another to a more confined set of explanations that have to do with manpower and soldiership. This includes a surprisingly low level of professionalism and cohesion on the soldier/unit level, and an inability to scale up its military forces through mobilisation, a genre that at least predecessors of the Russian Federation used to be good at.

This paradox becomes even more puzzling when considering that the international community of Russia pundits have over the last 10–15 years more or less neglected the role of the soldier on behalf of perhaps more intriguing topics, such as Russia's military technical modernisation and a, supposedly, altered Russian notion of war. However, the 2022 war against Ukraine has shown that unmanned vehicles and concepts of "hybrid warfare" have neither made the individual soldier redundant, nor taken them off the battlefield. Thus, how the soldier is trained and the military organisation supplied with soldiers is still significant for the outcome of a war. To paraphrase the American sociologist and political scientist, Theda Skocpol, it is time to "bring the soldier back in."[1]

1.1 Aim and scope

The ambition of this study is to explain the underachievement of the 2022 Russian "special military operation" against Ukraine from a military manning perspective. The main question guiding this work is as follows:

How can an examination of Russian military manning explain the difficulties that have faced its armed forces during the first year of the "special military operation" in Ukraine?

In order to answer this question, a substantial part of the research effort has been directed towards describing what the practice of manning the contemporary armed forces looks like. This includes analysing the manning structure and strategies and assessing the manning situation of the armed forces. Looking merely at how the armed forces currently fills its ranks, however, is not satisfactory, as the

[1] In *Bringing the State Back In*, Theda Skocpol and her fellow writers put the state back in as a key actor, influencing its surroundings, and not merely influenced by it. See Skocpol 1985.

preconditions for military manning are largely shaped and limited by factors that are persistent and predictable over time. Demographics such as birthrate and educational level are examples of this. Similarly, political decisions and the paths that the military chooses can be significant for the functioning of the military manning process for decades. The following two secondary research questions guide this more descriptive ambition of the report:

How have the armed forces' manning structure and strategies evolved in the post-Soviet period?

What was the pre-invasion manning level of the Russian armed forces?

The focus on pre-invasion manning levels can appear somewhat outdated due to Russia's ongoing war against Ukraine, an engagement that has caused current armed forces manning levels to fluctuate. Notwithstanding that concern, however, this is not the case. Grappling with the military losses emerging from the war, the Armed Forces will be facing at least similar challenges in satisfying its current need of manpower to those it had throughout the 2010s and the build-up phase following the military reform that commenced in 2009. Thus, a clear picture of how successful recruitment and retention have been leading up to the war is essential for assessing the prospects of manning the armed forces in coming years.

Finally, yet importantly, the ambition of this report is also to serve as a reference for those who seek to understand or delve into specific concepts related to contemporary Russian military manning. For this reason, fact boxes are used throughout the report to briefly sum up concepts and notions that are somewhat peripheral to the scope of the report, but are nonetheless significant to the overall subject.

1.2 Methodological approach and delimitations

Some aspects of military manning, such as morale, cohesion, leadership, etc., are methodically challenging to study. This is not to say that these are less important, but being more elusive and somewhat prone to be more case-specific, they are not the primary focus of the report. Instead, the focus of this report is the manning structure and the measures employed by the Russian ministry of defence (MoD), for example, to recruit and retain personnel. It is reasonable, however, to assume that manning strategies, service conditions, and the formal provisions of how the armed forces treats its soldiers could also affect the more vague qualities of soldiership.

Several things shape how a state chooses to organise military manning. On a very fundamental level, these include not only ambitions, and the purposes that military

forces are needed for, but also restricting factors, such as demography and the population's willingness to serve in the military. Hence, studying the strategies employed by a state to organise military recruitment and retention should include an analysis of both the strategies themselves and the overall structure of military manning.

Structural-level research on military manning is here understood as studying how a state has organised the administration and filling of the Armed Forces' manning requirements. This includes, for example, how modern armies employ conscription, voluntary service, or a mix of those to fill their active military ranks, but could also include the hiring of mercenaries or forming local militias. In most modern armies, this also includes the assembling of a military reserve force. Furthermore, the attainment of policies and processes employed by the state to man its military organisation is determined by factors such as demography and public health.

Studying strategies of military manning encompasses, for example, the question of the means that are employed to incentivise, persuade or mandate citizens into military service, and how well the citizens respond to these measures. The success of such measures is also dependent on the given circumstances. Hence, on the one hand, hazing and corruption or, on the other, strong patriotic sentiments, could be at play, either reinforcing or weakening the will to serve.

This study employs both perspectives in order to analyse in what manner military manning is conducted in the contemporary Russian armed forces. This is well aligned with the long ongoing military discussion in Russia on *komplektovanie* (eng. 'staffing' or 'manning'); commonly used to denote the act of military recruitment for manning units, or the accumulation of a mobilisable pool of reserves, but it can also refer to a description of the fundamental principle(s) of military recruitment in a military organisation.[2]

In addition to delimiting the study to the observable structure and measures taken by the MoD that affect military manning, the scope of this report is also restricted to Russia's most central armed organisation – the Armed Forces. Throughout the post-Soviet period, there have been, and still are, other relatively heavily armed uniformed agencies and services in the Russian governmental structure, some of which also use conscription as a method to fill their ranks. The most important of these is the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiia*), which is the successor to what was until 2016 known as the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

The reasons for not including non-military armed forces in the analysis are twofold: first, an analysis of one or several of these organisations would inflate the scope of this report dramatically, especially as it is difficult to differentiate the parts of the *Rosgvardiya* that can be considered "military" from the parts that are

[2] See, for example, Smirnov 2003 & Shlyk 2006.

clearly constabulary. Second, the way that the *Rosgvardiia* fill their ranks shares many similarities with the Armed Forces. Thus, with this report's level of abstraction, little value would be added by a side-by-side comparison of the two organisations, in terms of manning policy.

Lastly, although Russian private military companies (PMCs) have in recent years been used extensively, both to pursue Russian interests abroad as well as on the battlefield in Ukraine, they are not components of the Armed Forces, and use unorthodox methods for filling their ranks. Hence, the recruitment of PMCs deserves a separate analysis.

1.3 Sources

The report relies predominantly on publicly available Russian sources, including books, academic articles, newspaper reporting and, not least, official information emanating from the Russian MoD.

Using Russian official information as well as Russian media published from Russian soil is associated with certain risks, directly related to the regime's gradual move in a more authoritarian, not to say totalitarian, direction. However, all is not doom and gloom and there are still several good reasons to study Russian military manning on the basis of publicly available Russian sources.

In comparison with the era of the Soviet Union, the post-Soviet period in Russia has been a wonder of openness and transparency by governmental bodies as well as in journalistic freedom. As the manning structure of the contemporary Russian armed forces is the result of a nearly 30-year ambition to reform and modernise, much of the available knowledge on Russia's current military manning structure emanates from times when accurate and truthful information was disseminated rather freely. Especially worth mentioning is the period 2009–12, when a major, and financed, military reform was launched and supervised by the then defence minister, Anatolii Serdiukov. For the sake of the reform, this was a time when high-ranking MoD representatives and others were openly talking about the many problems facing the armed forces, including normally sensitive issues such as suicide rates, desertion, and corruption.

Journalists' freedom has since been pruned to an extent that in 2022 practically none remains. Simultaneously, the MoD, under Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu, has taken a tighter grip on the official dissemination of MoD information, and cracked down on leaks of unofficial information via, for example, the private blogs of active or former servicemen. Nonetheless, official information regarding some aspects of military manning and the conditions of service in the Russian armed forces has paradoxically become more available than before.

This has to do with the effort to professionalise the armed forces, i.e. shifting from state-mandated to voluntary military service. Relying increasingly on the

willingness of Russian citizens to serve voluntarily in the Armed Forces, the MoD has had no other choice than to be open and transparent about the terms and conditions of service. For the purpose of attracting recruits, several internet resources have been set up with information about military service and various recruitment brochures, printed on glossy paper, are constantly disseminated by the MoD and the Armed Forces. Although official information about the circumstances that meet the newly drafted or enlisted serviceman has never been more abundant, the picture painted by the MoD is most likely somewhat embellished. But in order to get the draftee to sign a contract, or for those already contracted to sign on for a second period, the information provided has to be reasonably aligned with the actual circumstances of serving in the Armed Forces.

Lastly, most aspects of military manning are hedged within a rigorous legal framework. Federal laws, governmental decrees and a plethora of amendments to existing laws regulate various aspects of military service. This includes the duties associated with compulsory military service, the social rights of the serviceman, etc. Legal changes or amendments to existing laws that are of concern are closely followed by Russian media, as the public interest in especially the terms and conditions of what is state-mandated is massive. The processed and summarised reports provided by Russian media are usually sufficient in order to understand the essence of changes in the legal framework. Thus, this report only refers to original legal documents when they are absolutely required.

1.4 Structure of this report

This report consists of seven chapters. Subsequent to this chapter, Chapters 2 and 3 place the question of military manning in Russia in, firstly, the current context of the ongoing war against Ukraine and, secondly, in the historical context of the post-Soviet period. Chapters 4 through 6 constitute the main analysis of the current manning structure of the Armed Forces. A more detailed description of the chapters follows below.

Chapter 2 covers the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and focuses on the measures that the Russian side has taken that are especially important from a military manning perspective: their refraining to use conscripts, the unorthodox and desperate recruiting in the summer months, and the partial mobilisation that commenced in September.

Chapter 3 provides an account of how the series of post-Soviet military reforms affected manning structure, with a specific focus on the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, which fundamentally altered the Russian Armed Forces in relation to its Soviet predecessor.

Chapter 4 contains an outline of the evolution of the current personnel structure of the Russian armed forces, and ends with an assessment of how its total manpower figure has evolved.

Chapter 5 focuses in detail on how the Russian MoD has adapted its policies for recruitment and retention, especially in the light of the transition to a military manning system based on voluntary service.

Chapter 6 considers how military mobilisation works in the contemporary Russian Armed Forces.

Chapter 7 summarises the findings and presents the overall conclusions of the report.

2 The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine

This chapter seeks to summarise and discuss, from a military-manning perspective, some key observations related to soldier behaviour and how the Russian "special military operation" has been carried out during its first year. This description of the war is not restricted to the premises of this report, i.e., focusing solely on the Armed Forces, their personnel structure and manning strategies and policies. It has a broader approach, one that is employed to expose, and not exclude, significant traits of how Russia has employed (or not) its military forces in Ukraine. At the same time, the description of the war is restricted to observations linked to military manning, and should therefore not be perceived as a full-blown account of the war's first year.

Among the observations highlighted and discussed are Russia's unwillingness to use conscripts; the use of non-military forces and unorthodox recruiting; the reports of abuse and atrocities committed by Russian soldiers; and the partial mobilisation that commenced in September 2022.

Force variety and the restriction of not deploying conscripts

A noticeable aspect of Russia's war effort is how a blend of both regular Russian military forces and other types of forces has been utilised. From the onset of the invasion, other units have complemented units of the Armed Forces. This includes the Russian National Guard (*Rosgvardiia*) and units loosely associated with it under the command of the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov; mercenary forces organised in private military companies (PMCs); and the Russian-backed separatist forces of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LPR and DPR, respectively).

According to some accounts, the invading force comprised 190,000 troops, of which around 50,000 were *Rosgvardiia*, or LPR/DPR forces.[3] The reason why Armed Forces were supplemented by *Rosgvardiia* units was likely based on both the correct belief that subjugating Ukraine would need a substantial force in terms of manpower, as well as the mistaken belief that the Ukrainian armed forces would soon be defeated and the operation would transition to occupation.

Ten days after the commencement of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, President Putin, in his International Women's Day speech, said that neither "conscripts nor reservists of the reserve" would be called up for deployment to the "special military operation" in Ukraine.[4] This unwillingness to deploy conscripts

[3] Cancian 2022.
[4] President of Russia 2022a.

is nothing new and stems from both Soviet experiences in Afghanistan as well as the two Chechen Wars that the Russian Federation fought in the 1990s and 2000s. In an interview in as early as 2013, Defence Minister Shoigu had said that by 2020 Russia would have completely refrained from using conscripts in combat operations.[5]

Nonetheless, only a few days into the invasion, the Russian MoD admitted that they had unintentionally deployed conscripts to Ukraine, but that the wrongs committed by the authorities were being sorted out.[6] The assurance that no Russian conscripts were to be sent to a "hot spot" was once again repeated in late March.[7] With diminishing cases of reported conscript casualties and prisoners of war, it is likely that this pledge was largely honoured.[8] There were, exceptions, however, such as the sinking of the Slava-class cruiser, *Moskva*, on 14 April 2022, with reported conscript casualties.[9] Although the commitment not to deploy conscripts has largely been kept, Russia started to call up citizens from the reserve in September 2022.

By refraining from deploying conscripts to the war in Ukraine, a significant share of the manpower available to the Russian MoD in the form of around a total of 260,000 conscripts went unused during the invasion. Especially affected by this was the Russian Ground Forces, due to its relatively high proportion of conscripts in relation to professional soldiers.[10] The Ground Forces had for years prepared for scenarios where only professional soldiers are deployed, by forming and training battalion tactical groups (BTGs) comprised solely of either conscripts or professional soldiers.

A deployment of conscripts *en masse* early on would also have emptied large areas of the Russian territory of their soldiers, and thereby endangered Russia's military readiness for unanticipated contingencies – domestic or foreign. Thus, the invasion force would not necessarily have been larger by involving conscripts, but it would certainly have improved Russia's option of holding units in reserve.

A more serious problem for Russian force design was that the all-professional Ground Forces BTGs deployed to Ukraine had imbalances in their force structures. The reason is that professionals consistently occupy specialist and sergeant positions, whereas conscripts predominantly occupy infantry private positions.[11]

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[5] *Vesti* 2013.
[6] *Interfax* 2022.
[7] *Vedomosti* 2022.
[8] This is also supported by the fact that Russian casualties in the ages of 18 to 20 are uncommon, see *Mediazona* 2023.
[9] *Guardian* 2022a.
[10] In autumn 2019, privates and sergeants serving under a contract amounted to 53 percent of the Ground Forces, with the remaining 47 percent serving as conscripts. It is also likely that the proportion of conscripts was somewhat similar in early 2022. See Redstar 2019a.
[11] Kofman & Lee 2022.

Thus, the motorised rifle and tank BTGs deployed had a full outfit of vehicles, but carried little or no infantry to dismount.[12]

Steep casualties and manpower shortages

Shortly after the invasion, it became clear that the Russian forces had failed to reach their initial objective of swiftly seizing the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, and other large cities, such as Kharkiv. Fierce resistance by the Ukrainian armed forces inflicted heavy casualties and equipment losses on the invading force, predominantly made up of Russian armed forces units.

Russian casualties are hard to assess but according to the count by BBC Russia/Mediazona, based on social-media posts, obituaries, and reporting by local media or local Russian authorities, there were 14,093 Russians confirmed as killed in action (KIAs) during the war's first year.[13] This should be considered a conservative figure, partly because of the delay from time of death until, for example, an obituary is published, and partly because it is not a certainty that all KIAs are publicly heralded. Therefore, the BBC itself claims that this figure should be doubled.[14] This would mean that Russian KIAs after one year of war would amount to approximately 14,000–28,000.

Not all KIAs, however, can be pinned to the armed forces units that were part of the invading force. Almost 4500 of the KIAs confirmed by BBC/Mediazona were *Rosgvardiia*, PMC members, or volunteers and mobilised individuals who had joined the ranks of the armed forces after the war began. Hence, KIAs who can be pinned to the structure of the pre-invasion armed forces are more likely around 10,000–20,000. Based on his book *War by Numbers* (2017), in 2022 Christopher Lawrence assessed the wounded-to-killed ratio for Russian troops in Ukraine that same year to be 1:4.[15] This would imply that the pre-invasion armed forces organisation has carried losses in an order of magnitude of 60,000–120,000. Thereby, the losses (KIAs) inflicted on the armed forces during one year of war in Ukraine are comparable to Soviet losses during ten years in Afghanistan, and surpasses the combined Russian casualties of the two Chechen wars.[16] The BBC/Mediazona statistics also reveal that armed forces casualties were especially steep in the first and second months of the war; replacing the exhausted or defeated troops soon became a dire necessity. It quickly became evident that this was anything but undemanding for the Russian military leadership.

The Russian manpower predicament became particularly evident during the summer months, when the necessity to assemble replacements reached new

[12] Ibid.
[13] *Mediazona* 2023.
[14] Ivshina 2023.
[15] Lawrence 2022.
[16] *Moscow Times* 2022.

heights. Organised as two army corps under Russian military command, the separatist forces of the LPR and DPR had thus far played an important role in Russia's war effort. In September 2022, in an ill-concealed criticism of his own professional military forces, President Putin expressed his approval of the courage of DPR and LPR forces fighting on the frontline, which is particularly interesting as the war-ridden societies of the two people's republics are even more endemically corrupt and chaotic than most of the Russian regions.[17] However, early mobilisation and, in some cases, forced conscription in both the LPR and DPR had exhausted the potential to recruit additional soldiers from these two regions.[18] Thus, Russia had to seek replacements among the Russian population, and subsequently resorted to an aggressive campaign to find new recruits in the most unorthodox ways.

During the summer months, local administrations in many Russian regions started to form volunteer battalions, but the "volunteers" were likely primarily attracted by the high wages offered.[19] Simultaneously, the private military company, Wagner, started to search for potential recruits in Russian prisons and correctional camps. Most likely sanctioned by Moscow, Wagner offered the convicts high wages and their freedom if they chose to fight in Ukraine for a 6-month period.[20] Ramzan Kadyrov, the head of the Chechen Republic, was also compelled to increase his efforts in showing allegiance to the Russian president. In August-September 2022, a newly formed all-Chechen regiment within the Armed Forces 42nd Motorized Rifle Division, in Khankala (Grozny), was deployed to Ukraine.[21]

Serious manpower shortages, combined with the highly successful Ukrainian counteroffensive east of Kharkiv, in August, were likely what urged the Russian leadership to commence partial mobilisation, announced on 21 September, and possibly also the decision the same week to annex four Ukrainian regions: Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. By incorporating these four regions into the Russian Federation, Russia could, if need be, have sent conscripts to the war without breaking, at least not formally, the pledge not to deploy units manned by conscripts.

Atrocities and human-rights abuses

The image of the Russian soldier deployed to Ukraine has hitherto differed substantially from how Russian soldiers performed in Russia's allegedly successful military operations in Crimea and Syria in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Instead of well-trained and well-equipped young Russian patriots serving voluntarily in highly effective combat units, the image has become one of poorly

[17] *Fokus* 2022 & Gricius 2019.
[18] On the early mobilisation in LPR and DPR, see Gimalova & Burdyga 2022.
[19] Tiumen online 2022.
[20] *Guardian* 2022b.
[21] Mustaev 2022.

disciplined and ill-prepared soldiers with low morale, recruited predominantly from the poorer ethnic minorities of the Russian Federation, and habitually mistreated by their superiors.[22]

Already on the invasion's second day, the first reports of Russian soldiers looting Ukrainian grocery stores for food had surfaced.[23] To some extent, this behaviour can be attributed to both the poor discipline and the massive problems with supply lines and military logistics that were present from the very onset of the invasion. The looting soon went beyond stealing food and fuel to make up for logistical shortages, reaching nearly systematic levels. An analysis conducted in May 2022 by the media outlet *Mediazona* showed rises in "unusual" shipments from Russian and Belarusian border towns to central parts of Russia, indicating that substantial volumes of looted goods were and still are being sent back to Russia from Ukraine.[24]

In addition to looting, more serious allegations of war crimes soon surfaced. The withdrawal of Russian forces from towns north of Kyiv at the turn of March and April 2022 revealed atrocities committed by the retreating forces. Extrajudicial killings of civilians in the Kyiv suburbs of Bucha and Irpin sparked an international outcry, and Western leaders soon visited the scenes of the massacres as they started to travel to Ukraine to show support for its struggle. Accusations of war crimes against civilians received renewed focus when mass graves were found in a forest in the outskirts of the northeastern Ukrainian city of Izium, in September.[25]

Because of the allegations of atrocities and the commitment of war crimes, international organisations have commenced investigations in Ukraine. A report by the *UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine* (HRMMU), published in June 2022, shows that extrajudicial killings of civilians have occurred not only in territories in the Kyiv, Chernihiv, Kharkiv and Sumy regions that were under Russian control in February-March 2022, but also pins other deaths on the Russian armed forces.[26] A similar result was presented by the *Independent Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine to the UN Assembly*, established in March 2022, in its report published on 18 October 2022. Based on visits in 27 towns and almost 200 interviews, the report firmly established that "Russian armed forces are responsible for the vast majority of the violations identified."[27] In addition to unlawful killings, the report also points to documented patterns of torture, unlawful confinement, rape and other sexual violence committed in areas occupied by Russian armed forces.[28]

[22] Massicot 2022.
[23] *Reuters* 2022.
[24] *Mediazona* 2022a.
[25] Bilefsky & Wong 2022.
[26] Bogner 2022.
[27] UN report 2022.
[28] Ibid., p.14–22.

Clearly, the image of Russian soldiers involved in the looting and unlawful killings of civilians is the opposite of the *polite people* image that the Russian MoD has been advocating since the annexation of Crimea in 2014.[29] Although it is likely that some atrocities can be attributed to separatist or Wagner forces, there is mounting and convincing evidence that many of the perpetrators belong to the Russian regular troops.

In Bucha, Ukrainian authorities quickly pointed to soldiers belonging to the Eastern Military District 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade as responsible for war crimes committed against civilians in the town of Bucha.[30] Later, convincing evidence has also linked elite units of the Airborne Troops to the atrocities in Bucha.[31] Approximately three weeks after the withdrawal of the 64th Motorized Rifle Brigade, Russian authorities awarded the unit the honorific "guards" designation for "heroism and courage" shown in battle.[32] This says a lot about the attitude of the Russian government on these matters.

Partial Mobilisation in September 2022

In a television broadcast on 21 September, President Putin announced that Russian authorities would commence a partial mobilisation that would involve 300,000 Russian citizens in the military reserve.[33] This was a clear departure from his earlier assurance that the government would not call up citizens in the reserve for deployment in the "special military operation," which from a historical perspective is both an unusual measure and relatively modest in scale.[34]

Two weeks into the partial mobilisation, on 14 October, the Russian president revealed that 222,000 had so far been called up and that 33,000 had been enrolled into a military unit, of which 16,000 had been deployed to the war zone.[35] Another two weeks later, on 28 October 2022, defence minister Shoygu reported to the president that the "partial mobilisation" had succeeded and therefore ended.[36] During the course of 37 days, a total of 300,000 had been called up and, by the end of October, 218,000 of those mobilised were undergoing training, while 41,000 had already been deployed to the "special operation." One week later, on 7

[29] '*Polite people'* refers to the epithet the Russian Special Forces earned after its participation in the annexing of Crimea in 2014. The epithet has since been enlisted to encompass the notion that the contemporary Russian soldier is well-trained, highly disciplined and equipped with the most modern pieces of equipment. See, for example, *Lenta* 2017.
[30] *Kyiv Independent* 2022.
[31] *New York Times* 2022.
[32] Presidential decree 2022.
[33] President of Russia 2022c.
[34] The call-ups during the First and Second World Wars amounted to 14.5 and 31 million men, respectively.
[35] *Vedomosti* 2022.
[36] President of Russia 2022d.

November, the number deployed to the front had risen to 49,000, according to the Russian president, and then, in early December, to 77,000.[37]

From the very outset, the "partial mobilisation" was anything but a smooth operation. According to *Forbes*, in the first two weeks after the president announced partial mobilisation, some 6–700,000 Russian citizens had left Russia, presumably those who had either received draft orders or those who thought they were in danger of being drafted.[38] Thus, in order to reach the target of 300,000, additional draft orders had to be sent out to substitute for those who did not show up.

That the call-up has encompassed more Russian citizens than the official number of 300,000 is also confirmed by the sudden spike in marriages that occurred shortly after the partial mobilisation commenced. This analysis is possible due to the condition that those called-up are entitled to register marriages immediately instead of applying one month in advance. Thus, by tallying excess marriages in the Russian regions, Mediazona, a Russian media outlet in exile, concluded that at least 492,000 had been called up under the "partial mobilisation" by mid-October.[39]

The massive problems in organising the "partial mobilisation" were soon highlighted in Russian media, and later also acknowledged by the Russian authorities. Possibly as a way for the authorities to control the discussion about the all too obvious difficulties related to the partial mobilisation, Margarita Simonian, the Kremlin propagandist and editor-in-chief of RT, the state-controlled media organisation, blamed military commissariats for the chaos that the mobilisation entailed.[40] The message that the situation was to be blamed on the military commissariats has also come from the very top. According to President Putin, it was the use of old forms and registries that had not been updated for a long time that had caused the chaos.[41]

Although the defence minister declared the "partial mobilisation" over, the lack of a formal presidential decree to end it has fuelled suspicion that it will actually be the MoD that decides when additional mobilisation is needed.[42] These suspicions are supported by the presence of measures that are aimed at broadening the pool of citizens eligible for future mobilisation. One example is the presidential decree signed on 4 November, which opened up for consideration for mobilisation of citizens convicted of serious crimes, well after the defence minster's claim that the mobilisation had ended.[43] Another is a draft law from February 2023 that in times

[37] President of Russia 2022e; President of Russia 2022f.
[38] Tofaniuk & Sapronova 2022.
[39] *Mediazona* 2022b.
[40] *News.ru* 2022.
[41] *Vedomosti* 2022.
[42] *Meduza* 2022.
[43] *RIA Novosti* 2022.

of mobilisation, martial law, or war, will empower military commanders with the authority to apply disciplinary arrests without court decision.[44]

The proposed 30 percent expansion of the Armed Forces

On 21 December, President Putin participated in the annual year-end meeting together with Defence Minister Shoigu. In addition to the usual oration of the year's achievements, most of the meeting was occupied by discussion of the 'special military operation' and the deceitful West's brainwashing of the Ukrainians and its use of Ukrainian neo-Nazi elements to fight Russia.

During the meeting, Shoigu revealed a suite of actions that, if successfully implemented, will be the most dramatic organisational change in the Armed Forces since the initiation of the 2008 Serdiukov/Makarov military reform. Among the more conspicuous news, in terms of military manning, was an imminent substantial increase of the total number of uniformed servicemen, to 1.5 million; an increase in the number of servicemen serving under a contract, to 695,000;[45] a gradual rise in the age range of mandatory military service for Russian male citizens, from the ages of 18–27 to 21–30.[46] Later it was revealed that the increase in servicemen is targeted to take place in the years 2023–26.[47]

The impending increase in manpower is likely directly linked to the series of organisational measures also revealed, and that encompassed the strengthening of Russian land forces, i.e., the Ground Forces, the Airborne Troops and the Naval Infantry, by the creation of new divisions, or the transformation of the existing smaller brigades into full-blown divisions. Thus, the changes are most likely closely related to the Russian military and political leadership's conclusions about the military shortcomings and failures in Ukraine.

[44] State Duma 2023.
[45] This should be compared to the all-time-high figure of 405,000, revealed in March 2020.
[46] President of Russia 2022g.
[47] *Tass* 2023.

3 Post-Soviet Russian military reforms

This chapter studies Russia's several-decades-long struggle to transform its remnants of the Soviet Armed forces into a fighting force adapted to the security challenges and ambitions of the Russian Federation. The intention here is not to provide a full historical account of Russian military reform for the more than thirty years that have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead, the ambition is to provide a background to the general development of Russia's Armed Forces and, particularly, the choices of paths that are still having an impact on the military manning situation in the Russia of today.

In terms of impact on the current Russian armed forces, the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, conceived in autumn 2008, shortly after the Russo-Georgian War, assumes a special position.[48] This is partly because of its proximity in time, but also because Russia's military adventurism in recent years is commonly attributed to the attainments of the reform. Nevertheless, both of the failed attempts at reform during the 1990s and 2000s, as well as subsequent events, are important for understanding the development of the Armed Forces from a military manning perspective.

3.1 Partition of the Soviet Armed Forces and early military reforms

In the late 1980s, the Soviet Armed Forces constituted the main military force on one of the conflicting sides of the Cold War. As such, it managed a vast mass-mobilisation army able to deploy millions of soldiers to the Central European theatre, the world's largest nuclear weapons stockpile, and naval forces second only to the US Navy's. It was therefore natural that the fate of the Soviet Armed Forces became a point of great concern when the Soviet Union collapsed, disintegrating into several independent states.

On a global level, the main concern was mainly the risk of nuclear proliferation, as well as an uncontrolled dissemination of the Soviet military stockpile, which potentially could fuel ongoing-armed conflicts around the world. The creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) partly filled the void after the Soviet Union by fostering post-Soviet cooperation in several spheres. It offered a provisional solution on how to control the Soviet nuclear stockpile, but the desire

[48] This report follows the same practice as that of the military analyst, Aleksandr Golts, by labelling the post-Soviet military reforms, or attempts at military reform, with the names of the military leaders who are associated with the reforms. These are often, but not necessarily, the incumbent defence minister and or the Chief of the General Staff. See Golts 2017.

for sovereignty and independence among the former Soviet states was too strong to interrupt the disintegration of the Soviet Armed Forces.[49]

Building its own state apparatus and forming a national military force based on the commonly held spoils of the Soviet Armed Forces was central to each of the newly independent former Soviet states. The Russian Federation was by far the largest and thus inherited the lion's share of the Soviet forces, a share that would eventually amount to 85 percent of the Soviet Armed Forces organisation.[50] However, weakened by the economic crisis and the political turmoil of the '90s, Russia had enormous challenges in absorbing the spoils of Soviet military structure, and Russia's lot constituted a somewhat unbalanced inventory. While some of the former Soviet military capabilities transitioned almost in their entirety to the newly formed Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, others were instantly disbanded due to the loss of necessary infrastructure.

The *Budapest Memorandum*, signed in 1994, made Russia the sole nuclear power of the former Soviet republics. Although in control of the enormous Soviet nuclear stockpile, Russia lost control of assets key to the nuclear weapons capability, such as rocket engine manufactures in Ukraine and the Semipalatinsk test site, in Kazakhstan. The situation was similar within the Navy. While a protracted dispute between Russia and Ukraine on the partition of the Black Sea Fleet was not solved until 1997, the Russian Federation eventually inherited the bulk of the Soviet naval forces. Russia ended up with 81 percent of the Black Sea Fleet and lost a fourth of the small Caspian Flotilla naval inventory to Azerbaijan, but worse was losing much of the naval infrastructure and naval bases in the Baltic, Black and Caspian Seas.[51]

A service branch that contracted considerably in the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation was the Ground Forces. The concentration of Soviet ground forces units was high in the former Soviet border regions close to Central Europe and thereby lost to Moscow when incorporated into the newly independent former Soviet states. In this way, Moscow lost almost 40 percent of the military units, along with their respective manpower.[52] Not only that, due to the proximity to Central Europe, several of the units lost to Belarus and Ukraine were among the Soviet Union's more well-trained and capable, whereas the Soviet units based on Russian soil were more often cadres, or had reduced manning.[53] However, ground forces withdrawn by Russia from East Germany were generally of high quality.

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[49] See, for example, Kubichek 2009.
[50] Golts 2017:46.
[51] See Valuyev 2003, on Russia's withdrawal of former Soviet military equipment from the three Baltic countries; Felgenhauer 1999, on the partition of the Black Sea Fleet; and Maksimov 2021, on the Azerbaijan share of the former Soviet Caspian Flotilla.
[52] Zherebtsov 1996.
[53] Whisler 2021:359.

In sum, on paper, the young Russian Federation retained an impressive military force that was still among the world's strongest, especially in terms of its massive inventory. In reality, it was an unbalanced blend of remnants of a largely unreformed force that was still licking its wounds after its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989.[54]

3.1.1 Military reforms of the 1990s and 2000s

The challenge for the Russian Armed Forces, however, was not merely its largely unreformed Soviet legacy. The economic hardship and political turmoil of the 1990s resulted in the stagnation of domestic procurement, with the mothballing of many military research and development projects initiated during the time of the USSR. Because of the limited technical modernisation, even the pieces of military equipment that were new or modern in the late 1980s had aged considerably by the time of the Russo-Georgian war. In addition, lacking domestic orders, the military-industrial complex had to become export-oriented in order to survive.

Hence, in the early 1990s, the young Russian Federation had neither the economic means nor the political will to do much else than to simply incorporate the remains, as they were, of the Soviet Armed Forces allotted to Russia. However, during the 1990s and 2000s, initiatives to reform the armed forces were launched on numerous occasions. Military analyst Alexander Golts has suggested that up until the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, in 2008, there were four serious attempts to reform the Russian Armed Forces in the post-Soviet period (see fact Box 1).

Fact Box 1 – Post-Soviet military reforms

1992 – *Chaos, reductions and war*
Stocktaking and reduction of former Soviet military equipment, infrastructure and units. Contract service introduced and conscription shortened, but the attempt at reform largely failed due to corruption, low financing and the First Chechen War (1994–96).

1996 – *Cutting the coat according to its cloth*
The Defence Council Secretary advocated that the armed forces must live within Russia's financial means and not the MoD's perceived needs, but met fierce resistance by defence minister Rodionov, who contended for keeping a Soviet-style army with large mobilisation potential.

1997 – *A nuclear offset strategy*
Arguments on the 'unlikelihood' of a large-scale war were put forward. Being a nuclear great power, Russia could compensate for its lack of conventional capabilities. The armed forces continued to reduce in size but the 1998 financial crisis, the outbreak of the Second Chechen War, and resistance from groups advocating conventional military strength, obstructed thorough reform.

2002 – *Putin's man*
It was widely assumed that the appointment of one of Putin´s closest friends to defence minister would finally break internal resistance to thorough military reform. However, defence minister Ivanov largely sided with the generals and pursued policies that were well received within the armed forces.

Source: Compiled from Golts 2017, pp. 20–83.

[54] Talks on the need for a military reform began in the late 1980s, but no comprehensive reforms were launched; see Felgenhauer 1997.

Aside from a few attainments, adjustments to the organisation were mostly limited to reduction in the size of the armed forces, while modifications of its core structure were few and often merely decorative. Hence, while the armed forces organisation gradually contracted, its structure and organisation remained essentially Soviet. Several attempts at thorough reform were by no means half-hearted, but typically lacked the necessary funding and were usually resisted by powerful factions within the military ranks who, as insiders, benefitted from the spoils in a malfunctioning, essentially Soviet organisation.

Nonetheless, even though the attempts to reform the armed forces in the 1990s and early 2000s were largely unsuccessful, many of the traits today associated with the Russian Armed Forces were already discussed, experimented with or partially adopted in the 1990s.[55] This included, for example, the creation of (operational-) strategic commands and the professionalisation of the armed forces. The harsh experiences of the two Chechen wars forced change, and efforts made to transform some of the Soviet units into "permanent readiness" were at least somewhat successful.[56]

3.2 The Serdiukov/Makarov military reform

In February 2007, a new defence minister, Anatolii Serdiukov, with a background in the Federal Tax Service, was appointed by the Russian president. Not having a military rank, he was an unusual figure to lead the armed forces, but the decision to appoint him was likely well considered. At the time, economic crimes within the military ranks were epidemic, with more than 36,500 reported economic crimes and some 10,000 individuals within the armed forces linked in some way or another with "irrational or inappropriate" use of government funding.[57]

Merely a month after his installation, Defence Minister Serdiukov launched large-scale financial audits of the armed forces.[58] By targeting the vested interests of generals and admirals who had successfully resisted reform for almost two decades, opposition against the new and militarily unexperienced defence minister amassed. This was a dangerous pursuit and if it had not been for two circumstances in the summer months of 2008, the Serdiukov era would likely have been shorter and the comprehensive military reform that had yet to follow might never been launched or, at least, looked very differently. These circumstances were, firstly, a change in the military leadership and, secondly, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008.

In June 2008, Nikolai Makarov replaced Yurii Baluevskii as Chief of the General Staff, the most senior military position in the armed forces. In Makarov the defence minister found a Chief of Staff who was not fostered in the "Arbat Military

[55] Whisler 2019.
[56] Whisler 2021:368–9.
[57] Koriakin 2009:9.
[58] *E1.ru* 2007.

District," a pejorative for generals who spent too much time in Moscow and not enough time in command, and seemed sincere in his determination to address deep-rooted structural issues that encumbered the development of the armed forces.[59] While Serdiukov's economic background made him perhaps the right man to target inefficiencies and corruption, as a military man Makarov had a different perspective but one that was fully compatible with the defence minister´s.

By serving in both the Group of Soviet Forces in East Germany and in the *Zabaikal* Military District (also Transbaikal MD), Makarov had experienced how service conditions, training intensity and readiness varied substantially and how this affected unit quality. [60] Whereas Soviet forces in East Germany had been highly prioritised, i.e., fully manned and equipped, and the access to foreign currency improved life for servicemen and their families, the exact opposite was true for the military units located in the rural and often neglected parts of the Soviet Far East.[61]

A military leadership with a clear opinion of where the root of the problem within the armed forces lay was not nearly enough, however. Unlike earlier in the post-Soviet period, Russia's state coffers were well filled, thanks to almost a decade of steadily increasing prices for hydrocarbons. However, any increased spending on the armed forces would risk being gobbled up by a highly inefficient organisation, infested to the core by corruption. Thus, a genuine and effective reform would also need the resolve to go against powerful structures of high-ranking officers who had grown accustomed to using their military positions for their personal gain.

To alter this predicament, the wholehearted support from the political leadership was required, and it was the five-day Russo-Georgian war in 2008 that focused their attention on the problem. Although Russia managed to reach its military objectives, the war illuminated the fact that Russia's Armed Forces were in every aspect still an organisation in stagnation, technically, conceptually and morally.

A "New look" for the armed forces

The military leadership soon exploited the window of opportunity for comprehensive military reform that opened in 2009, by launching a long-term plan for the modernisation of the armed forces, introduced as a roadmap to give Russia's armed forces a "New Look" (Ru. *Novyi Oblik*).[62] The plan was to fundamentally transform the armed forces during the years 2008–2020 by

[59] This was expressed by the former minister of defence, Serdiukov, in an interview in May 2018, *Kommersant* 2018.
[60] Zabaikal MD is sometimes translated in English as Transbaikal MD.
[61] This is a recurring topic in his memoirs, published in 2017. See especially Chapter V, where Makarov conveys his experience as division commander in Zabaikal MD (Makarov 2017).
[62] Barabanov 2010:5.

simultaneously addressing three areas of reform, but completed in three consecutive stages.[63]

The first stage (2008–11) encompassed structural reforms to alter thoroughly both the organisation of military units as well as their support structures. The second stage (2012–2015), encompassed finalisation of social reforms and ensuring that the rights of military servicemen were satisfied. By the end of the third stage (2015–2020), a comprehensive rearmament of the armed forces that would make 70 percent of the entire military inventory modern was to be completed.[64]

The technical modernisation of the armed forces is the area of reform that has probably attracted the most interest from outside observers. This has mostly to do with the well-funded State Armament Programme for the years 2011–20 (*GPV–2020*), signed in late 2010, which has sparked hype over the years about supposedly huge leaps in hi-tech capabilities, leaving Western countries without viable responses.[65]

In reality, the problems of Russia's Armed Forces had less to do with a persisting reliance on obsolete equipment and more to do with the persistently ineffective and essentially Soviet force structure, which distorted the military personnel structure. This is also reflected by the five "priority tasks" of the reform, of which all but one are directly related to the manning structure, service conditions and soldier proficiency (see Fact Box 2), as expressed by the Chief of the General Staff, Nikolay Makarov.

The technical modernisation of the armed forces was by no means either insignificant or unimportant, but its centrality varied among the service branches and separate arms. The Navy, the Air Force, the Strategic Rocket Forces, the Space Forces and to some extent the Airborne Troops were all less affected by

Fact Box 2 ─ Priority tasks of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform

Transform all military units into constant readiness units with full wartime manning.
Rearm the armed forces with armament and equipment that meets modern-day requirements.
Rework military statutory documents for education, training and conducting operations, and regulations concerning day-to-day routines of troops and forces.
Form a new officer and sergeant cadre; develop new training programmes and create a modern network of training facilities.
Provide military personnel with decent salaries and permanent housing, and work out issues concerning social guarantees.

Source: MoD 2011.

[63] Kolbin 2011:36.
[64] See, for example, Arbatov & Dvorkin 2013:13–14.
[65] Examples of this hype include Russia's A2/AD capabilities, electronic warfare capabilities, and the 'Wunderwaffen' that President Putin presented during the annual presidential address to the federal assembly in 2018.

organisational and structural changes, thus the modernising of their military inventories came much more into focus.[66] However, the pre-reform situation of the Ground Forces, the Rear Services (the military logistics apparatus), the military educational system, the military health care system, the military districts, and central bodies of military command and control were very different. As this still consisted largely of remnants of Soviet skeleton establishments originally designed to field, sustain and command a vast mass-mobilisation army, ready to be dispatched to the European theatre, reorganisation and altering the personnel structure became the main focus.

Eliminating the Soviet mass-mobilisation army

Prior to the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, Russia's Armed Forces had an organisation designed to be able to expand by more than threefold in times of war – from nearly 1.4 to more than 4 million men during the course of one year.[67] This was merely a capability on paper, as approximately 90 percent of military equipment in mobilisation storage bases was in fact obsolete or defective.[68]

How the reform affected the military personnel structure in more detail can be summed up in a few points. First, all cadres and partially manned units were either merged to fully manned units, or disbanded.[69] This had a dramatic effect on the most populous service branch, the Ground Forces, whose organisation contracted substantially. Most affected by this was the officer corps, as senior officers who had held position in units that were to reach full strength through mobilisation became redundant.

Second, with a much leaner combat force structure there was no longer a need for a vast military support structure, i.e., the rear services (military logistics), the military educational system, military hospitals, and administrative functions. These structures were not only reduced in size but Soviet practices were abandoned. This included the holding of lead positions by commissioned officers in the rear services or the fact that the MoD owned a large number of farms, often commanded by an officer of colonel rank.[70] Once again, these changes affected primarily the officer corps, especially the senior officer cadre, as a significant share of the support functions were sold off, privatised or outsourced, and with civilian officials occupying the ones kept.

Third, the transition from a four-tier command structure (army–division–regiment–battalion) to a three-tier (army–brigade–battalion), as well as the

[66] The Air Force and the Space Forces were in 2015 merged and became the Aerospace Forces.
[67] MoD 2011.
[68] Ibid.
[69] The cadre units of the Ground Forces were essentially, until the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, division-size units staffed with only a group of officers amounting to some 5–10 percent of the total manpower, but that were to become fully manned in the event of mobilisation; Chuvakin 2019:229.
[70] *Kommersant* 2018.

decentralisation of military command by instating Joint Strategic Commands (JSCs) made a large cohort of senior staff officers redundant. The latter led to a fourfold reduction, almost 40,000 positions, in the numbers of military and civilian positions in the General Staff, service branch headquarters, and other command functions in Moscow.[71]

Fourth, with the mass-mobilisation army taken down there was no longer a need out in the regions for a vast system of administrative military bodies, known as military commissariats, for organising mobilisation. About 95 percent of these were disbanded, from over 1600 down to 80 military commissariats nationwide.[72] Along with this massive reduction, the military commissariats were also turned into all-civilian agencies, making even more senior officers redundant.[73]

Towards a "compact, efficient and balanced" military force

The common denominator of the structural changes was to dismantle functions that were intended to enable scaling up of the size of the military forces through mobilisation, and instead emphasise the combat-readiness of the forces. However, the idea was never to entirely abolish all scalable military capabilities, but rather to create a balanced active force that was versatile and sustainable in the long-term. The legal framework of accumulating discharged servicemen in a mobilisation reserve was, for example, preserved.

However, to form a new, modern system of either cadre units or mobilisation storage bases was likely not a priority, for several reasons.

First and most importantly, it was imperative not to divert focus from the reform's main objective, i.e., the final dismantling of the Soviet mass-mobilisation army, whose functioning had been distorted by financial cutbacks during the 1990s and 2000s, and had become a convenient source of illicit income for a significant number of senior officers. Thus, the anticipated resistance among the officer corps made reform inconceivable, and the mass-mobilisation system had to be rooted up in its entirety.

Second, the experiences of the post-Soviet period had shown perfectly clearly that what Russia needed was a military force that could be instantly deployed, and not the multimillion-man armies of the Cold War.[74] As long as the needs in the active

[71] MoD 2011.
[72] Kjellén 2022.
[73] Kretsul & Lavrov 2020.
[74] In his annual address to the Russian Federal Assembly, in 2006, President Putin recalled a conversation he had with the Chief of the General Staff at the onset of the Second Chechen War, in 1999. At that time, the general had told the president that 65,000 soldiers were needed to repel the insurgents, but, in the organisation of 1.4 million personnel, there were only 55,000 soldiers available in combat ready units (President of Russia 2006).

forces were so dire, it made no sense to direct valuable resources to form modern versions of Soviet cadre units.

Third, due to its large size in comparison to most of its European and Central Asian neighbours, Russia would be able to field and support a relatively large active force. Thus, a large, modern, active, high-readiness Russian force would be sufficient for most viable contingencies, whereas nuclear deterrence would form the basis of the security relations with China and NATO.

Dismantling the Soviet mass-mobilisation army, thereby targeting the very structure of corruptive ties in the Armed Forces, was likely the greatest achievement of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, as it freed up resources to continue with the second and third stages of reform: social reforms and technical modernisation. However, this also created many enemies and neither Defence Minister Anatolii Serdiukov nor Chief of the General Staff Nikolay Makarov would stay long enough, as they were both replaced in 2012, to oversee more than the finalising of the first stage.

3.3 Russia's military leadership since 2012

In late 2012, first the defence minister, Serdiukov, and then, a few days later, the chief of the general staff, Makarov, were sacked by President Putin. At first glance, the reason for sacking the defence minister appeared to be links to a corruption scandal. But since for many he personified the harsh measures enacted in the reform, it is likely that this became a liability when the armed forces turned from downsizing to growth.

Two new figures at the top of the military leadership were the former Minister of Emergency Situations, Sergey Shoigu, and the then three-star general, Valerii Gerasimov.

Unlike Serdiukov/Makarov, the Shoigu/Gerasimov duo cannot be considered reformers. If anything, consolidating the direction set out by Serdiukov/Makarov is characteristic of the Shoigu/Gerasimov tenure, especially in terms of manning and readiness. However, this has not stopped Defence Minister Shoigu from, shamelessly, trying to take credit for the military reform.[75] Indeed, some of the more controversial reform measures have been partially reversed. This includes, for example, reversing some of the most criticised cases of dismantling or outsourcing of military support functions, and resurrecting divisions within the Ground Forces.[76]

[75] In September 2019, the renowned defence journalist, Ilia Kramnik, wrote a critical examination of Shoigu's claims and published it online on the homepage of the Russian newspaper, *Izvestiia*. The article was swiftly taken down but is readily available on internet blogs (Kramnik 2019).

[76] *Vesti* 2013.

Aired early by the new leadership was the recreation of some of the mobilisation capabilities that Serdiukov/Makarov had dismantled in their entirety in order to create a modern structure of mobilisation force-generation. Nevertheless, as we see in Chapter 6, progress in this area has been generally slow due to the persisting primacy of concern for increasing readiness, the level of technical modernity, and fully manning the standing force.

Russia's military adventurism is perhaps the most visible characteristic of the Shoigu/Gerasimov tenure, which includes the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the subsequent war in eastern Ukraine, the intervention in Syria in 2015, and the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. These have not only resulted in deteriorated relations with the West, but also somewhat altered the culture of openness and the permissive approach to the individual freedoms of servicemen that was indicative of the period from 2009 to 2012. Instead, increased paranoia and the nurturing of patriotic sentiments have become increasingly more central in the MoD's approach towards the military personnel. The classifying of information on military deaths in peacetime, harsher restrictions on the use of cell phones, and rules forbidding servicemen from writing, or posting photos, about themselves on the internet, are all examples of the stricter and more austere rules and regulations imposed. [77]

[77] *RBK Group* 2015; Iurshina et al. 2018.

4 Active duty personnel

The previous chapter provides an overview of how military reforms have shaped the Russian Armed Forces in the post-Soviet period. From a military manning perspective, essentially three periods during the last 15 years have been particularly important for understanding the military personnel structure in contemporary Russia. The by far most important period involved the massive restructuring and reorganisation under Serdiukov/Makarov in the years 2009–12, although the reforms in both 2006–08, when the shortening of the compulsory length of military service was enacted, and 2013–16, with the considerable increase in the number of contract servicemen, were also important.

The purpose of this chapter is to study the active personnel structure of the Russian Armed Forces just prior to the invasion in 2022. Followed by a brief overview of the overall military manning structure, the active personnel structure is examined in two steps. First, in four separate sections, the main personnel categories of the Russian armed forces are outlined. Each comes with a description of its development in recent years, in both quantitative as well as qualitative terms. Although the NCOs of the contemporary Russian Armed Forces are essentially contracted servicemen, they are examined separately due to the special importance often attributed to the importance of having a professional cadre of warrant officers.

In the chapter's concluding section, Russia's 2022 pre-invasion total active military manpower is assessed on the basis of the analysed personnel categories. This somewhat intricate approach is a necessity due to the piecemeal and irregular disclosure from official Russian sources of the figures concerning military manning.

Overall manning structure

On a fundamental level, the Russian military manning system in pre-invasion 2022 can be described as a mixed system of both compulsory and voluntary military service, in which recruits served exclusively in practically fully-manned and equipped active units led by a corps of professional officers. After demobilisation or dismissal, servicemen were placed in the military reserve and obliged to serve if called upon, typically in time of war or martial law. In practice, however, there are numerous paths for an individual to pursue through the Russian military system, one more intricate and complex than the other. Details of the many traits of the Russian military manning system are outlined in this and the following two chapters.

Figure 1 presents a much-simplified flow chart over the basic components of the military manning system. Analytically, these can be separated into three groups. First, the four personnel categories in the "active service" group are considered

"uniformed servicemen in active service" (Ru. *voennosluzhashchie*, hereafter referred to as "military servicemen"), and are examined in this chapter. Second, the MoD is also closely involved in the early stages of the military manning process. This includes not only both administrative tasks, such as organising the semi-annual draft periods, but also the implementation of strategies to improve the recruiting conditions of the armed forces. These aspects are further examined in Chapter 5. Third, after completed mandatory service or dismissal from active service, former servicemen are placed in the military reserve, a sequence further examined in Chapter 6.

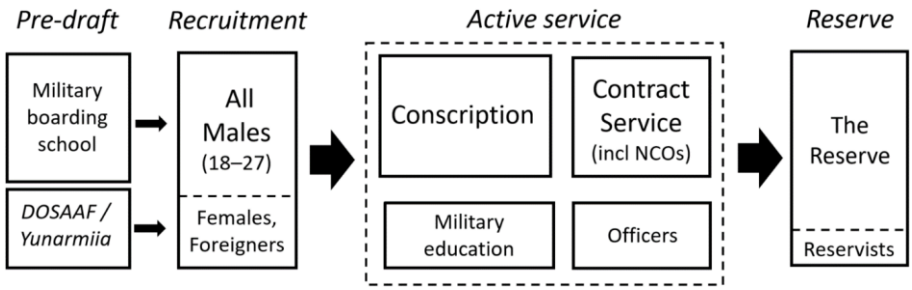

Figure 1 – The basic components of the Russian military-manning system.

The Russian military serviceman

The question of who is considered a military uniformed serviceman in active service is carefully codified in Russian Law, and distinguishes them from the rather large group of civilians also employed in the Armed Forces.[78] The reason for this is that the definition is linked to a catalogue of rights covering not only the serviceman, but also the members of his or her closest family. These rights span from social benefits and privileges retained during service as well as rights kept after leaving service, such as military pensions and veteran alimonies. An example of the benefits ensuing from the status as a former military serviceman is the way the Russian Federation still continues to maintain social guarantees extending to those who served in the Soviet Armed Forces.

The rights and obligations of military servicemen encompass both those who are serving in the armed forces under a contract, as well as those who serve as conscripts. Formally, those serving under a contract encompass officers, NCOs, privates (soldiers and seamen) and students enrolled in an organisation that is part of the higher, or professional, military educational system.[79] Conscripted military servicemen include citizens undergoing their state-mandated military service as a private or an NCO, as well as those enrolled in a military professional or higher

[78] See Federal Law 1998, *On the Status of Military Personnel*, Article Two "Citizens with status as military servicemen."
[79] Ibid.

educational organisation for the purpose of signing a contract upon finishing training.

4.1 Conscription in Russia

Universal and mandatory conscription has been Moscow's main way to recruit soldiers during the 20th century, thereby making use of one of Russia's primary historical advantages since Napoleonic times vis-à-vis its European neighbours, namely its large population. The ability to draft a massive number of soldiers was vital, for example, in order to halt the massive World War II (WWII) land invasion launched by the *Wehrmacht* in the summer of 1941. Although a massive Soviet demobilisation followed the end of WWII, conscription continued to be a pillar of the Soviet military's Cold War strategy, as it was the method for training and accumulating a pool of trained military men for the Soviet mass-mobilisation army, intended to fight the combined forces of NATO in the event of a third world war.

Conscription in the Russian Federation is regulated in the Law on Universal Conscription of 1998, but much that still characterises conscription today goes back to the corresponding Soviet law of 1967. All male citizens aged 18 to 27 are eligible and the annual call-up consists of two drafting periods. In December 2023, it was announced that the draft age range will gradually increase to 21–30.[80]

Normally, the spring draft starts 1 May and ends on 15 June, and the autumn draft starts on 1 October and ends 31 December.[81] However, there is a plethora of local regulations affecting the drafting periods locally; for example, education personnel and farmers, as well as citizens living in remote regions, are only drafted once a year. [82] In 2022, the length of compulsory military service was without exemption 12 months, but has varied across service branches and over time (see Fact Box 3).

Fact Box 3 – Conscription in the USSR & Russia

Conscription was the main method of enlisting soldiers for the Red Army (1918–45), the Soviet Armed Forces (1945–91) and the post-Soviet Russian armed forces (1992–…). Length of service has varied substantially over time.

1918–1922 – 12 months (6 months until October 1918)
1922–1924 – 18 months (longer in the Navy/Red Air Fleet).
1924–1939 – 24 months (longer in the Navy/Air Force).
1939–1967 – 36–48 months depending on branch of service.
1967–1992 – 24 months, two annual draft periods introduced.
1992–1995 – 18 months, but 24 months in the Navy.
1995–2007 – 24 months for all.
2007–2008 – 18 months for all.
2008 –… – 12 months for all.

Sources: Spivak & Pridemore (2004); Tass (2013).

[80] President of Russia 2022.
[81] VKR 2019a:31 & Tass 2022d.
[82] MoD 2019c.

The state-mandated military duty and the way the Russian state forces it upon its citizens involves several obligations that extend beyond heeding the draft when summoned and the completion of compulsory military service. This includes entry to the military registry in the first quarter of the year in which male Russian citizens turn seventeen, and participation in mandatory pre-draft education. After completed compulsory military service, taking part in the military reserve as well as heeding eventual summoning of reserve forces are also part of the military duty.[83] In times of martial law or war, the obligation is also extended to heeding the call-up, serving and participating in training.[84]

Military commissariats (*voenkomaty*) are the MoD's territorial administrative organs, which organise and implement the military draft, as well as administer the military registry and conduct mobilisation preparations. Prior to enlistment, the conscript has to undergo a medical examination in order to determine each individual´s condition and assess their psychological and physical capability. Based on the results of the examination, the fitness of recruits is then assessed according to the five categories listed in Fact Box 4.

The numbers of citizens called up to drafting commissions during the spring or autumn drafts are considerably larger than the actual numbers drafted. Those receiving mark C, D, or E, are habitually handed an exemption warrant, while those with A or B are drafted for military service. However, an intricate set of regulations provides several legitimate reasons for postponing, suspending, or even exempting, compulsory service. Long-extant legal grounds include education (admission to higher education) and family situation, but the regulations are more or less under constant revision.[85] For example, the mass-exodus of specialists employed in the Russian IT sector following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in March 2022 led to the

Fact Box 4 – Fitness for military service

Prior to enlistment, the conscript undergoes a medical examination in order to determine physical fitness and to assess psychological and physical capability. Based on the result, the conscript is categorised in five groups.

(A) – Fitness for military service without restrictions; sub-groups determining medical history, such as serious injuries, minor vision impairment, etc.
(B) – Fitness for military service with minor restrictions; sub-groups determine the eligibility for which type of military service.
(C) – Limited fitness for military service.
(D) – Temporarily unfit for military service due to health issues.
(E) – Exempt from military service due to health reasons.

Those who receive A or B are eligible for the draft, whereas category C are only drafted in the case of war. Temporarily unfit soldiers (D) are later called in for a supplementary medical examination.

Source: PryizyvaNet.ru; *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* 2018.

[83] Maksimenko 2019:5.
[84] Koriakin 2015:79–80.
[85] The Russian MoD keeps an updated list of the current legitimate grounds of deferment on its homepage (MoD 2022c).

creation of an exemption that granted this category of draftees the right to postpone service.[86]

By tradition as well as necessity, the distribution of those drafted is on the basis of an exterritorial principle, meaning that the citizen serves in a region other than the home region where he was summoned by the regional or local military commissariat. The reason for this is partly out of necessity, as population density differs substantially between Russian regions, but also has ethnic and religious motives, in that it has generally been undesirable to have units with a high concentration of soldiers belonging to the same ethnic group[87]

It should also be noted that some of the citizens called up for military service are not destined for service in the Armed Forces but to other federal ministries, agencies and services. Although the Russian Border Guards stopped filling their ranks with conscripts in 2009, a substantial number of draftees is, nonetheless, enlisted annually to primarily the *Rosgvardiia*, and to a lesser extent to the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations (Russian abbreviation, *MCHs*).[88] The number of conscripts drafted for service in *Rosgvardiia* has been steady, around 11,000–13,000 during the spring and autumn drafts in 2017, 2019 and 2022.[89] Hence, for the purpose of this report, around 25,000 are assumed to be drafted annually to organisations other than the Armed Forces.

Compulsory military service largely follows a similar pattern for all conscripts. After the drafting commission deem an individual fit for military service and is drafted, he is sent to either an educational unit or a military unit to commence military service. The training starts with a month-long basic training course (*kurs molodogo boitsa*, KMB), which ends with the soldier's taking the military enlistment oath (*voennaia prisiaga*) and then continues with specialist training. After five months, the conscript will have obtained a military speciality (*voenno-uchiotnaia spetsialnost, VUS*).[90] The remaining service time is usually devoted to field training, gradually increased in complexity and scope.

In 2002, Russia adopted a federal law providing citizens a constitutional right to an alternative military service based on conscientious objection. Due to the long service length, with a duration normally 1.75 times longer than ordinary military service, and the bureaucratic hassle involved, alternative service has remained relatively unpopular.[91] As shown in Figure 2, after an initial peak, the number of applicants for alternative service has risen slowly over the course of the 2000s and

[86] *Tass* 2022c.
[87] Koriakin 2015:94–95.
[88] Kulikov 2010.
[89] *RIA Novosti* 2017; *Tass* 2019; Rosgvardiia 2022.
[90] VKR 2022:36.
[91] Lanca & Brett 2016.

2010s, but remains an unusual path for the young Russian eligible for military service. The number of applications that are approved is generally high.

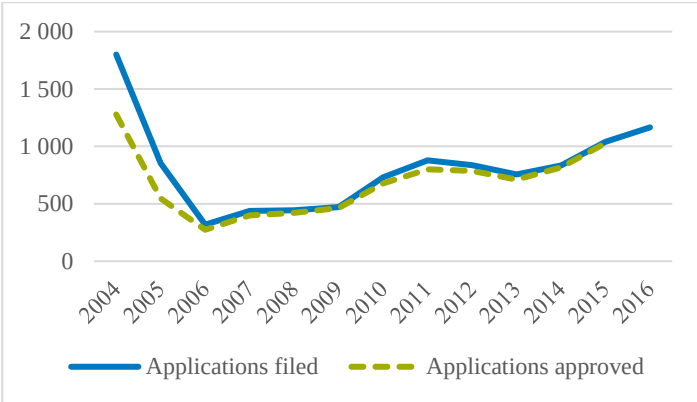

Figure 2 – Alternative military service in Russia, 2004–16

Source: CAL 2016.

Shortening of compulsory service in 2006–2008

One of the more important reforms of the Russian Armed Forces manning system since the turn of the millennium was the shortening of compulsory service, executed in two steps in the years 2006–08; in a first step, shortened from 24 to 18 months, and then, in a second step, from 18 to 12 months. In doing so, Russia returned to a general duration of compulsory military service that had not been seen in Russia since the early 1920s.

To retain the same number of conscripts in active service, the MoD had to compensate the reduction in service length by a twofold increase of draftees during the spring and autumn drafts. Thus, coinciding with the demobilisation of the cohort serving only 18 months, the number of conscripts drafted increased massively in autumn 2008. Figure 2 shows this increase, along with a culmination in the number of conscripts in 2009, and a corresponding decrease by mid-2011. This temporary spike in the annual draft was possible due to the fact that the pool of citizens eligible for conscription encompasses all men in the ages between 18 to 27 years, and that the number of legal grounds for suspending or postponing military service was reduced.[92] For example, having a child no older than three years of age was prior to 2008 a valid reason for deferment. However, with the new regulations, deferment due to parentage only applies in cases where the child is handicapped.[93]

[92] VKR 2019a:38.
[93] *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* 2008.

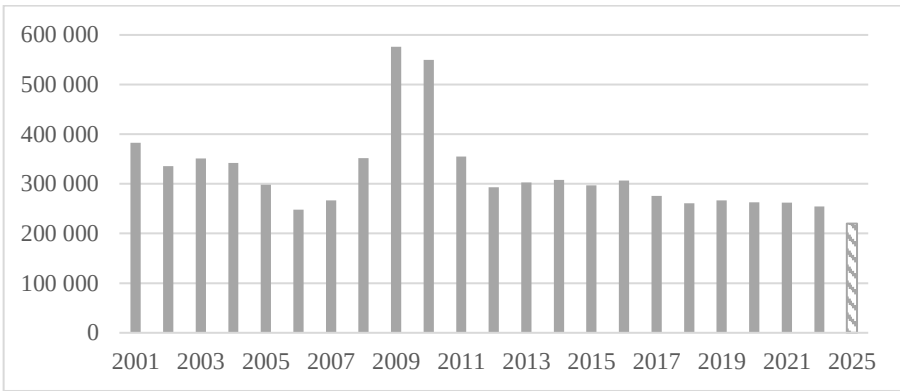

Figure 3 – Annually called up; quantities 2001–22, and 2025 forecast.

Sources: Author's compilation of presidential draft decrees, or MoD press releases on spring/autumn drafts, as well as Russian media reporting. See, for example, Kachurovskaia & Gulko 2006 & Tass 2013.

Comment: The approximate figure of 25,000 who are annually drafted for service in agencies and organisations other than the armed forces is not subtracted in the figure; the 2025 figure (striped) is a MoD target revealed by the Russian defence minister in 2018, see MoD 2018d."

From autumn 2011, the armed forces returned to more "normal' drafting levels (see Figure 3), which was possible due to the growing number of soldiers serving voluntarily under a contract, a topic that is further discussed in the following section. Noticeable is that, except for the years 2009–10, the numbers of drafted men have been relatively stable since 2006 and were forecast, in the pre-invasion period, to remain nearly the same until at least 2025.

4.2 Contracted military service

Throughout the 20th century, the state-mandated compulsory service was the foundation on which the Soviet mass-mobilisation army was built. However, a general disapproval of conscription in the 1990s, and the dire need to increase the quality of soldiers deployed in the Northern Caucasus impelled the MoD to introduce voluntary military service, i.e., service under a contract. It is noteworthy that this was the first real exception to conscription as the main method for manning military units since the early Red Army's mixed system of conscripts and territorial militias in the 1920s–30s.[94]

[94] Koriakin 2015:21–22.

Already in 1992, a Russian Federation government decree was issued concerning a gradual transition to a manning principle based on voluntary service.[95] The ambition was set high, with the aim to enlist 100,000 by 1993, and then reach 300,000 by the end of 1995, and then 500,000 contract soldiers by 2000. The recruiting went well, with 100,000 already enlisted by mid-1993 and 282,000 by 1995, very close to the target of 300,000.[96]

There were at least two reasons why enlistment was so successful at that time. Firstly, the dire economic situation in the early 1990s provided few civilian career opportunities for young Russians, making them more prone to enlisting. Secondly, despite the horrors of the First Chechen War (1994–96), there were many attractive positions available for contract servicemen in the bloated military bureaucracy who would never see any action. An effect of this was that the share of women serving in the armed forces increased sixfold in comparison to Soviet times: from 1.6 to 1.8 percent in the early and mid-1980s to almost 10 percent in 1999; in 1998, about half of all contract servicemen were women.[97]

Although the numbers enlisted were high, the early attempts to professionalise the armed forces largely failed since they resulted in relatively few contract soldiers serving in combat units. According to military analyst Aleksandr Golts, in 1998 as many as three-quarters of all contract soldiers served in the armed forces rear services.[98] Because of this, enlistment of new contract servicemen froze for some time, but when resumed in 1996 the recruitment effort was concentrated on filling NCO/warrant officer positions, such as squad leaders and assistant platoon leaders.[99] This more selective approach, in combination with the fear of being deployed to North Caucasus during the Second Chechen War (1999–01), resulted in fewer enlistments. By 2001, the number of contract servicemen had dropped to 140,000, and by 2003 this number was down to 80,000.[100] Nevertheless, in 2003, in an effort to give priority to combat units, about 45 percent of soldiers serving in Chechnya were serving under a contract.[101]

The federal target programme, 2004–07

The MoD did not give up on large-scale professionalisation of the armed forces. An experiment in full transition to contract manning was executed at the 76th Guards Air Assault Division in Pskov, in the years 2000–03. As the experiment was deemed largely successful, a federal target program was adopted in 2003, with the intention of radically increasing the share of contract soldiers in active service.[102]

[95] VKR 2019a:32.
[96] Ibid. p. 33.
[97] Surkova 2012:10 & and Golts 2017.
[98] Golts 2017:62.
[99] VKR 2019a:34.
[100] VKR 2019a:35 & *Kommersant* 2011.
[101] Polonskii 2018.
[102] VKR 2019a:30–44.

The programme, operational in the years 2004–07, aimed at increasing the number of servicemen serving under a contract from 80,000, in 2003, to 400,000, in 2008.[103] Increasing the number of contract soldiers within permanent readiness units (*chasti postoiannoi boevoi gotovnosti*) was, once again, especially emphasised. The drive to increase the number of contract soldiers showed early results among the permanent ready units serving in Chechnya, and by 1 January 2005 all soldiers deployed in Chechnya were contract soldiers.[104]

The programme to increase the number of contract servicemen was likely closely linked with a planned two-step shortening of conscription from 24 to 12 months, as an increase in contract servicemen would reduce the need for enlarging the draft to compensate for a shorter service time. Nevertheless, by 2008, the total number of contract soldiers had only increased to a mere 200,000, which was less than half of the programme's initial objective of 400,000.[105] Regardless of this, the MoD proceeded with the plan to shorten conscription, and the shortage of professional soldiers was compensated for by a temporarily increased draft.

The steep increase in contract soldiers, 2013–16

In late 2012, and as shown in Figure 4, the number of contract soldiers started to pick up and by 2016 amounted to almost 400,000, which was the objective of the 2004–07 federal target programme. The recruitment was also facilitated by the formation, in 2012, of a network of recruiting offices (*punkty otbory*).[106] Why the 2004–07 programme initially failed to reach its target, while the later effort was more successful, has likely to do with the fact that the latter was coupled with a massive public relations campaign and a deliberate policy to make military service more appealing.

This policy included clear-cut incitements, such as improved salaries and social benefits, but also less tangible aspects, such as making service more prestigious and humane; it also improved the options, for example, for combining civilian studies with military service (aspects further detailed in Chapter 5). Particularly receptive to the improved conditions were young Russian

Fact Box 5 – Basic requirements for serving in the military under a contract

Health	(A) or (B) in the medical examination.
Age	First contract signed between the ages of 18 to 40; contract renewal allowed until age 50.
Education	Most positions require completion of secondary school, but some only require primary school.
Fitness	Pass requirements in strength, speed and endurance.

Source: MoD recruitment brochure.

[103] *Kommersant* 2011.
[104] Chuvakin 2019:256.
[105] *Kommersant* 2011.
[106] *Redstar* 2013.

men in poorer regions, for whom a military career path became attractive due to the relative paucity of alternatives. The patriotic sentiment that followed the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and to some degree the Syrian operation in 2015, are likely to also have had an effect on enlistment.

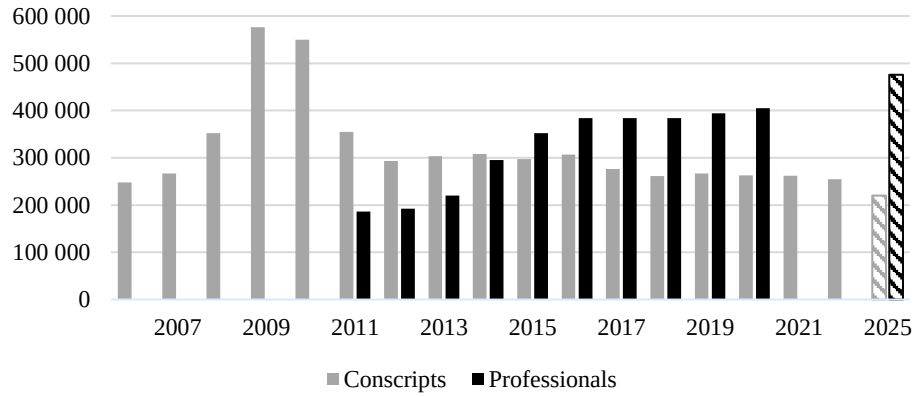

Figure 4 – Conscripts & contract soldiers; quantities 2006–21 & 2025 forcast

Sources: *Tass* 2011; VKR 2019a; *RIA Novosti* 2014; Ramm 2017; Redstar 2018; Mislivskaia 2020; *Tass* 2018d.

Comment: The approximately 25,000 personnel annually drafted for service in agencies and organisations other than the armed forces are not subtracted in the figure; the 2025 figure (striped) is a MoD target revealed by the Russian defence minister in 2018, see MoD 2018d.

Although the share of contract soldiers rose during the 2010s at the expense of conscripts, the MoD abandoned its initial plan of a full transition to a professional system sometime in the years 2015–18. This was probably due the increasing difficulties in further increasing the number of contract soldiers beyond 400,000.

In April 2015, the Russian military leadership boasted that by 2020 there would be 499,200 contract soldiers, but this number was later revised down to 475,600.[107] However, from 2016, the growth abated and in the following years the number of soldiers serving under contract increased only marginally. By 2020, the number of contract soldiers had risen to barely over 400,000, thus nearly 100,000 contracts short of the ambition laid out less than five years earlier.

In 2018, President Putin said outright that the MoD has changed its ambition in this matter, after "learning from the experiences of other countries."[108] It is likely that the MoD drew the conclusion that the diminishing growth rate of contract signatures could only be solved by a further increase in salary and improved

[107] MoD 2015a.
[108] *Tass* 2018b.

benefits, but that the marginal cost for further increasing the share of contract soldiers was simply not worth it.

Still, this did not stop MoD representatives from boasting about their recruitment achievements. One example is that Russian *Spetsnaz* units (i.e., Russian special operations forces) stopped using conscripts entirely from autumn 2019, thereby becoming an all-professional force.[109] Nonetheless, in October 2019, a mere 53 percent of the soldiers of the most populous service branch, the Ground Forces, were serving under a contract, and it was still heavily reliant on conscripts to fill its ranks.[110]

The difficulties the MoD has faced to further increase the recruitment of contract soldiers beyond 400,000 raises the question of whether the most recent target, revealed in December 2022, of reaching 695,000 contract soldiers, is realistic. [111] It is unclear, however, when this target will be met.

4.3 Non-commissioned officers

One of the main objectives in expanding the number of servicemen serving under a contract was to professionalise the cadre of junior commanders in the armed forces.

In the post-WWII Soviet Armed Forces, cadres of junior commanders at platoon and squad level were formed by the selection of conscripts with the appropriate skills, and then given additional training.[112] Compulsory military service of 3–4 years provided enough time for conscripts to accumulate sufficient training and experience to serve effectively as sergeants. However, with the length of general service shortened to two years in 1967, the foundation for the system of generating skilled junior commanders from conscripts weakened. If anything, the new order accentuated the fact that now there were only two levels of conscripts: freshmen and conscripts serving their second year, i.e. the *stariki*.[113] Instead of providing a basis for recruiting junior commanders, the new system not only enabled, but reinforced the evolution of structuralised hazing among conscripts. This was already a problem in the Soviet Armed Forces in the 1980s, but became endemic during Russia's dire political and economic situation in the 1990s.

It is possible that Soviet force planners foresaw such effects on the sergeants' cadre; in 1972, an NCO rank of *praporshchik*, which originated from the Imperial Russian army, was reinstated in the Soviet Armed Forces. [114] The rank of *praporshchik*, and its naval equivalent, *michman*, is roughly equivalent to warrant

[109] Gavrilov 2019.
[110] Redstar 2019a.
[111] President of Russia 2022g.
[112] Spivak & Pridemore 2004.
[113] Barndollar 2020.
[114] *Zvezda Weekly* 2018.

officers in the armed forces of many Western countries. However, it never evolved into the cadre of experienced NCOs for coaching and mentoring soldiers with less experience in combat units. Instead, at the time of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, about 82 percent served in positions with primarily administrative or logistical support functions.[115]

Hence, the *praporshchik* cadre accurately represented the kind of obsolete force structure remnants of the Soviet mass-mobilisation army that was targeted in the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, and was therefore abolished almost in its entirety. Overall, 142,000 positions were terminated, with only a small cohort of 20,000 remaining to serve as junior commanders; these were forced to either accept a sergeant's position in the "New Look" organisation or face dismissal.[116]

NCOs in the "New Look" organisation

The 2009 decision to abolish, instead of reform, the *praporshchik* cadre should not be interpreted as implying that the creation of a well-functioning NCO corps was neglected during the Serdiukov/Makarov reform. Quite the opposite, creating a functioning NCO cadre was something that the then incumbent Chief of Military Staff, Nikolay Makarov, saw as especially urgent. In his memoirs, he stresses the importance of a well-functioning junior military leadership. In a section devoted to the "role of the sergeants," he expands on why a military leader should pay close attention to the constant development of his junior command staff.[117] It is likely that some of the inspiration for this came from outside Russia, with the NCOs of the US military as the perhaps brightest example of a well-functioning corps of low-level military leaders bridging the gap between the soldiers and the officer corps.[118]

The solution to Russia's deficit in junior commanders was to create a corps of sergeants serving under a contract, in a fashion similar to the professionalisation of privates and seamen. However, it should be pointed out that this idea was nothing new. Early on in his tenure (2001–07), Defence Minister Ivanov pledged to form a professional NCO system by 2004, but likely failed due to the difficulties in attracting young Russians to sign contracts with the MoD at the time.[119]

During the first few years of the 2010s, growth in contract recruitment of both soldiers and sergeants was slow, and the relatively few sergeants recruited were likely enlisted predominantly to technical rather than junior command positions. This was probably all according to plan, as the MoD wanted to synchronise the deliveries of modern and technically more advanced weaponry with the

[115] MoD 2011.
[116] *Gazeta.ru* 2013.
[117] Makarov 2017: 95–97.
[118] *Versiia* 2012.
[119] Marshall 2014:198–199.

recruitment of technically skilled servicemen.[120] Hence, professional sergeants, as an institution, had not yet become the important link that junior commanders provide between the soldiers and the officer corps.

In 2013, as the new military leadership of Shoigu/Gerasimov was in full swing, reversing some of the more unpopular measures taken under Serdiukov/Makarov, the *praporshchik* rank was once again reinstated, with the goal of creating 55,000 positions.[121] However, in its essence, it was not a return to the institution in which *praporshchiki* constituted a separate corps of NCOs but that in 2009 was abolished by Serdikukov/Makarov. Instead, it became an extension of the existing system of contract manning, in which *praporschiki* merely constituted an additional rank, but with specific requirements in terms of qualifications and contract length. For example, whereas the first contract for soldiers or sergeants can be signed for two or three years, those who seek a position as a *praporshchiki* have to sign on for at least five years. Hence, the NCOs of the contemporary Russian armed forces, i.e. professional sergeants and *praporshchiki*, are all professionals serving under a contract.

Expansion of NCO training has seemingly followed the general development of the NCO cadre. The initial ambition of creating new training programmes for the NCOs was set high and in early 2009, a 10-month-long education programme to train professional sergeants had already been launched at six schools of higher military education throughout the Russian Federation.[122] This was quickly brought to a halt, however, due to the generally low qualifications of the applicants.[123] Since then, the training of NCOs has likely evolved, and in 2018 there were 13 military schools for NCOs (*praporshchikov*), spread out across the Russian Federation and commonly attached to a military training centre or military school (*voennoe uchilishche*).[124]

4.4 The officer corps

The military profession, and especially the officers, were highly regarded in the Soviet Union, but the events related to the breakup of the Soviet Union and the chaotic 1990s, with their bloody military operations in the Caucasus and widespread hazing and corruption, altered that picture fundamentally.[125] In the remnants of the vast Soviet military bureaucracy, there was an abundance of carefree positions for the military brass. Although the pay was low, these positions offered excellent prospects to increase personal earnings through corruption. Consequently, the resistance of this large cadre of senior and superior officers to

[120] *Armeiskii sbornik* 2017:14.
[121] *Lenta* 2013.
[122] *Versiia* 2012.
[123] *Lenta* 2009.
[124] *Zvezda Weekly* 2018.
[125] Barany 2008:48.

reform was driven not only by Soviet nostalgia but also self-interest. This was also why reforming the officer corps became the main objective, and perhaps one of the main achievements, of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform.

Because of a lack of reform in the 1990s and 2000s, the officer rank structure in the Armed Forces had gradually departed from its ideal pyramid-shaped distribution and become more round-shaped; with a relatively large share of senior (major to colonel rank) and superior officers (general and admiral positions), and all too few junior officers. In the first stage of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, this imbalance was dealt with by a massive reduction of the officer corps, especially targeting the senior and superior officer ranks, as well as a thorough reform of the Russian military educational system of which officer training was a centrepiece.

On 1 January 2009, and prior to the Serdiukov/Makarov reduction of the officer corps, there were 355,000 officers within the armed forces. Already the following year, more than half of these, or approximately 180,000 positions, were cut in the reform.[126] Although the initial aim had been set at retaining 150,000 officers, in early 2011 the target was already adjusted upwards – to 220,000, a proportion of 22 percent of the armed forces.[127] The effort to even out the disproportionate and top-heavy structure of the officer corps had likely been too ambitious and out of the increase of 70,000 new positions, 39,000 were offered to officers who had earlier been dismissed.[128]

Since the reform years of 2009–11, the Russian MoD has revealed little information on the development of the officer corps, both in terms of total size and composition. One of few exceptions was in 2015, when a deputy defence minister revealed that the corps amounted to "approximately 200,000 officers."[129]

It is likely, however, that the MoD has had significant challenges in filling all positions, even in recent years. The deficit has most likely been particularly acute in some specific categories. For example, for a long time, pilot training suffered from low capacity and was further worsened by the high procurement rate of new aircraft. In 2015, the deficit amounted to 1300 pilots, but by scaling up pilot-training schools, the annual graduation of junior pilots had risen substantially by year 2020.[130] The deficit in officers has likely also been a problem in larger personnel categories, such as those in the Ground Forces. In order to improve the situation, the length of education for combined arms officers was reduced in 2019

[126] MoD 2011; Barndollar 2020.
[127] Nikolskii 2011a.
[128] Nikolskii 2011b.
[129] *Vesti* 2015.
[130] Cast 2020.

from five to four years.[131] However, this was not unambiguous, as the training of naval infantry officers moved in the opposite direction, from four to five years.[132]

In December 2021, the Russian defence minister said that 96 percent of all officer positions were filled.[133] Thus, if the MoD has retained the nominal target of having a corps of 220,000 officers, the number of officers in the organisation would amount to around 211,400.

4.5 Servicemen enrolled in the military educational system

The system of higher military education, prior to the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, was like many other parts of the military organisation, a bloated and obsolete remnant of the Soviet army. At that time, higher military education was provided by 69 military educational organisations altogether; this included 16 military academies, 3 military universities, and 50 military schools for higher education.[134] This massive education system was upheld due to a tradition of constant further training programmes for the officer corps, and a massive cadet admission, with almost 20,000–25,000 new enrollments annually in the five-year officer programmes.[135] However, the output of junior officers was much less, due to a large number of dropouts. In 2007, the former high levels of 30–33 percent had been lowered substantially, due to new regulations that made dropouts financially liable for part of their unfinished education, but still amounted to 15 percent.[136]

Based on international comparisons, especially with Western countries, the military leadership concluded that the Russian military educational system had to contract considerably in order to be aligned with the actual demand of the armed forces and the economic capacity of the Russian Federation. For example, the enrolment in higher naval education in Russia exceeded the American rate by more than ten times, even though the Russian navy was considerably smaller in every respect.[137]

During the years 2008–12, the number of institutions of higher military education in Russia was radically reduced and by 2012 only 16 remained; these were three schools of higher education linked to the three service branches, eleven military academies and two military universities.[138] Simultaneously with the reduction in

[131] Krugloi & Stepovoi 2018.
[132] *VPK News* 2019.
[133] *Telekanal Zvezda* 2021.
[134] Alekhin 2007.
[135] Shlykov 2009.
[136] Alekhin 2007.
[137] *Kommersant* 2018.
[138] *Moskovskii komsomolets* 2012.

educational institutes, the corps of military educators was reduced seven-fold.[139] In addition, in 2010 the Russian MoD suspended the recruitment of cadets to military universities due to an abundance of officers in the armed forces. Many of the cadets graduating during these years were not offered an officer position, but a sergeant position instead, or were transferred directly to the reserve. [140] After a two-year break, military universities resumed accepting cadets in 2012 but at a much smaller scale and with only 2200 enrolled in the first year.[141]

In September 2019, the Russian defence minister revealed that altogether there were more than 70,000 individuals enrolled in the military educational system.[142] Also included in this figure, however, were underage pupils enrolled in military boarding schools. Thus, the number of military students who were considered "uniformed servicemen" in 2020 was around 60,000.[143]

4.6 Manpower of the armed forces

According to estimates by the Russian News Agency TASS, at the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the armed forces totalled some 3.7–3.8 million uniformed personnel in active service. A substantial part of these were reconstituted and became part of national military organisations of former Soviet states other than Russia, whereas the main share, estimated at 2.5–2.8 million soldiers, transitioned into the Russian armed forces when it was formed in May 1992.[144]

Reductions continued throughout the 1990s, with the number of military personnel on active duty estimated as 2.1 million in 1994, 1.7 million in 1997 and 1.2 million in 1999.[145] However, parallel to the reductions in the armed forces in the 1990s, uniformed forces belonging to other non-military-power ministries gained strength. The uniformed forces of the Ministry of Internal Affairs were reinforced after the widespread anti-Yeltsin demonstrations in 1993, and its Internal Troops played a major part during and after both the First (1994–96) and Second (1999–01) Chechen Wars.[146] Thus, the drastic manpower reduction in the ranks of the armed forces was somewhat compensated by the strengthening of, primarily, the Internal Troops. Manpower reduction in the armed forces likely continued during the 2000s, but was more marginal and therefore more difficult to track.

[139] Rusikov 2014.
[140] MoD 2018b.
[141] Ibid.
[142] MoD 2019b.
[143] This figure is also confirmed by a Russian scientific article on the military system of higher education, see Karlova & Grigorov 2020.
[144] *Tass* 2017; Polonskii 2018.
[145] *Tass* 2017.
[146] Bennett 2000:3–4 & 14–17.

In 2006, the total manpower of the armed forces was for the first time revealed in a presidential decree, in which manning limits were set for the organisation. As shown in Table 1, the manning limitations have since been altered slightly on six occasions but recently, in December 2022, the MoD announced the intention of increasing the manning limit substantially, to 1.5 million. In addition to giving a figure for the total manpower, each decree also specifies how many positions of the total number in the armed forces are earmarked for military servicemen (*voennosluzhashchie*), thereby also indirectly providing the number of civilian positions in the armed forces.

Table 1 – Total manpower of MoD forces according to decrees, in thousands.

	2006	**2008**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2023**	**Future**
Total manpower	2 050.5	2 019.6	1 884.8	1 903.0	1 902.8	2 039.8	*Na*
In uniform (nom.)	1 134.8	1 134.8	1 000.0	1 013.6	1 013.6	1 150.6	1 500.0
In uniform (%)	55.3	56.2	53.1	53.3	53.3	56.4	*N.a.*

Sources: CAST 2017; President of Russia 2017; President of Russia 2022b; President of Russia 2022g.

Retaining a one-million-man army was likely important to Russia for prestige reasons, since there is only a small group of states around the world that are able to maintain a military force of that size. What is important is that these figures merely reflect the maximum number of positions (ceilings) within the armed forces, and not the actual number of people serving in uniform, or civilians employed. Hence, what they do reveal is the overall military ambition of the Russian government in terms of manpower, and that this ambition has been rather steady through the years 2006–18.

In addition to the decrees stipulating total manpower, Russian MoD officials have a few times also revealed the actual manning level, i.e., the percentage of armed forces positions occupied during the course of the last decade. In 2019, the head of the Main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate within the General Staff (GOMU) revealed that the manning level had increased from 70 percent in 2012 to 95 percent in 2019.[147] The manning level in 2015 exceeded 92 percent, according to an announcement by the defence minister in December of the same year, which correlates well with the massive growth in contract soldier enlistment during the years 2012–16.[148] According to figures revealed in August 2021, the manning levels have continued to increase to 97.7 percent, with the aim of having reached 99.2 per cent by the end of 2021.[149]

In December 2021, the MoD revealed that the manning level was down, to 91 percent.[150] This was a significantly lower manning level compared with the figure

[147] *Izvestiia* 2019.
[148] President of Russia 2015.
[149] MoD 2021b.
[150] MoD 2021c.

of 99.2 percent revealed merely a few months earlier. It is likely, however, that the substantial total manpower increase, revealed eight months later via a presidential decree in August 2022, was already accounted for in December 2021.

Assessing the 2022 pre-invasion total manpower in active duty (military servicemen) is challenging, due to both the incompleteness of the data and uncertainties about what is included in the data provided by the MoD. The very specific official figures provided by the MoD on the number of contract servicemen and conscripts are not necessarily spurious, but to distinguish exactly what they encompass is not evident in all cases. The challenges include the following considerations: a small minority of conscripts are drafted for service to federal ministries, agencies and services other than the armed forces; a lack of updated figures or estimates regarding the officer corps; uncertainties about what categories of students in the military educational organisation are considered military servicemen; and how reservists serving under a contract are tallied in the official statistics.

Table 2 summarises official data and estimates of personnel according to personnel categories and general manning levels from three separate years during the period 2012–20. The years are selected partly due to relatively good availability of official data for these years, but also because they provide a wide spread over the course of the 2010s, which is a period of time when the new Russian Armed Forces took form.

Table 2 – Assessment of the numbers of servicemen in 2012, 2015 & 2020.

Military servicemen on active duty			
	2012	**2015**	**2020**
Conscripts	268,000[1]	272,000[1]	238,000[1]
Contract soldiers[2]	190,000	352,000	405,100
Officers	*180,000*	200,000	*220,000*
Military students	*50,000*	*55,000*	60,000
Sum of above	688,000	879,000	923,100
Number of positions and manning level according to MoD			
	2012	**2015**	**2020**
Positions (total)	1,000,000	1,000,000	1,013,600
Manning level	0.70	0.92	0.95[3]
Positions occupied	700,000	920,000	963,000

Notes: Data given in *italics* are estimates calculated by the author.
[1] subtracted by 25,000 for non-armed forces draftees; [2] this include soldiers and NCOs (sergeants and *praporshchiki*); [3] data from 2019.

Due to lack of data, it is assumed that the officer corps was slightly smaller in 2012, and slightly larger in 2020, in comparison with 2015. This assessment corresponds well to the rejuvenation of the officer corps that took place after the

drastic reductions that occurred in 2009–10. The assumption regarding students with the status of military servicemen and enrolled in military educational organisations is similar. Considering the thorough reformation of the military educational system in the late 2000s, with a temporary pause in enrolment, it is feasible to assume that the number of students in 2012 and 2015 were fewer, but growing, in comparison to 2020.

What is striking is that the sum of the personnel categories corresponds fairly well with the number of positions occupied for each three years. On the one hand, this could mean that the Russian official data provided regarding manning is fairly reliable, but on the other, and as pointed out above, the conceivable sources of error are many.

The data available for 2020 is the most complete out of the three, but at the same time shows the largest difference when comparing the sum of military servicemen in all relevant categories with the number of positions occupied. There are several possible explanations for this. First, it could be that the officer corps is somewhat larger than assessed here, but it is highly unlikely that this represents all the difference. Second, there could be categories of military students who are considered to be military servicemen but not accounted for in the 60,000 figure. Third, and most likely, the increasingly strong effort in the last few years to build a reservist force on a contractual basis could possibly represent an additional category of servicemen who are not accounted for in Table 2.

5 Recruitment and retention in the armed forces

Declining population and the generally poor health of the population were among the more serious long-term challenges of manning the armed gorces in the 1990s, as it gradually contracted the pool of young Russians eligible and fit for military service. Moreover, military service was widely associated with how young Russian men, mostly unwillingly, were forced into a system where hazing and abuse were rampant. Thus, the outlook for the ability of the armed forces to fill its ranks with healthy, well-educated and highly motivated servicemen looked extremely bleak.

Part of the solution was to introduce voluntary military service, but the lessons from the mostly failed attempts to recruit contract soldiers in the 1990s and 2000s had shown that in order to attract citizens on a voluntary basis, serving in the military had to become more appealing. Simultaneously with the dismissals of redundant officers and the overall organisational restructuring of the Armed Forces during the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, a comprehensive set of measures to improve military service, partly under the theme "humanisation of military service," commenced.[151]

This chapter seeks to outline the efforts made during the last 15 years (2007–2022) to improve the prospects of recruiting as well as retaining military servicemen. Conceptually, these efforts sought to satisfy essentially three types of desired values: to strengthen societal approval of the armed forces, to broaden or qualitatively improve the recruitment base, and to improve the incentives for serving in the armed forces.

Although the MoD could not directly affect how the armed forces was perceived in the Russian society or alter the problematic demographic situation of the Russian Federation, the MoD has over time pursued a broad set of measures intended to improve both its recruitment base and the conditions of serving in the armed forces. It is probable, however, that improvements in one group are generally beneficial to recruitment and retention in the armed forces. Hence, increased societal support and acceptance are likely to encourage more citizens to seek a military career; greater competition in the enrolment in higher military education enhances the prestige of service; and a gain in the prestige of military service may well affect the general opinion of the armed forces in a positive way.

[151] Falichev 2010.

5.1 Strengthening the military recruitment base

The demographic situation was for a long time the number one long-term threat to military manning in Russia. Birthrates had already started to fall in the last years of the Soviet Union, and continued to fall throughout the 1990s.[152]

The effect on the pool of young men eligible for conscription was not immediate but delayed by eighteen years, and during the years 2008–11 the annual cohort of young men turning eighteen dropped considerably, from about 1 million to about 700,000.[153] This drop appears clearly in Figure 5, which shows the sizes of the annual cohorts of Russian men turning 18 in the years 1995–2016, and who are thus eligible for being called up for military service. Since 2011, the demographic situation has stabilised somewhat in the sense that the annual cohort of men turning eighteen has shrunk much more slowly. This more positive demographic situation, in terms of draft recruitment, is acknowledged in the Russian Security Strategy from 2015, which also highlights positive trends in public health and life expectancy. [154]

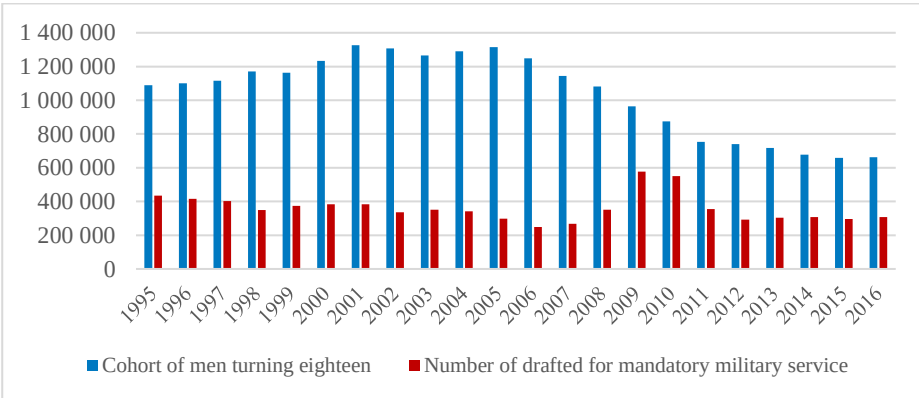

Figure 5 – Russian men turning eighteen, and numbers drafted; 1995–2016.

Sources: Kachurovskaia & Gulko 2006; Figure 4.

Interestingly, the radical reduction in the number of men turning eighteen coincided with the shortened conscription length that compelled the MoD to increase the call-up in order to sustain manning levels. Hence, for a few years, the number of draftees amounted to almost 60 percent of the cohort of men turning 18. It is only possible to maintain such high call-up ratios for a few years and, thanks

[152] World Bank 2022.
[153] Vendil Pallin 2008:157.
[154] See articles 10 & 11 in Presidential decree 2016.

to that, the draft age range is 18–27. The reason why this is not sustainable in the long term is the rather large number of exemption warrants granted to those deemed unfit for service. In addition, by increasing drafting, fewer will be able to dodge the draft when they are 18 and then be available to be drafted a couple or a few years later. However, in the years when drafting is low, the cohort of men who are not granted exemption will accumulate and can be drafted later. But if this continues, with the draft levels of the years 2009–2010, for a long time, the pool of older men eligible for being called up will eventually become depleted. Thus, the long-term sustainable figure is more likely a call-up ratio of 40–45 percent, which is seen in the years 2012–16.

Nonetheless, the Russian MoD has since 2009 resolutely pursued strategies to improve recruitment, including a broad range of measures to improve the recruitment base of both conscripted and contracted servicemen. This includes efforts to expand pre-draft training, inculcate patriotic sentiments among the youth, provide voluntary alternatives to mandatory military service for the cohort of young well-educated Russians who the MoD wants to attract, and to make military service more inclusive for women and foreigners.

Pre-draft and military and patriotic education

With the significantly reduced compulsory length of service from 24 to 12 months in the years 2006–08, there was less time for compensating for drafting ill-prepared conscripts by giving them additional training.[155] Thus, the requirements for those drafted increased substantially. This compelled the MoD to expand and improve pre-draft training in various ways, and a concept entailing "principles and methods" for how to cultivate pre-draft training was developed by the MoD in 2010.[156] Of particular interest here is the development of voluntary pre-draft military training for children under eighteen, and to a lesser extent the military secondary education boarding schools.

In 2009, the Russian government reinstituted the Soviet organisation for pre-draft training: *The Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy*, commonly known by its Russian abbreviation, DOSAAF.[157] While its predecessor, ROSTO, the Russian Defence Sports-Technical Organisation formed in the early 1990s, was long hampered by low financing, DOSAAF regained the status it once had in Soviet times as well as its purposes, i.e., to induce patriotic sentiments, promote physical training and prepare minors for military service.[158]

The main purpose of DOSAAF is to provide pre-draft training in a broad range of both civilian and military specialities, the latter including, for example,

[155] The then defence minister expanded on this topic in an interview in 2009; see Gavrilov 2009a.
[156] VKR 2019a:39.
[157] DOSAAF homepage 2022.
[158] *RIA Novosti* 2016.

marksmanship, driving, and skydiving. Military specialities supplied by DOSAAF are defined and financed by the MoD, and when a military speciality (VUS) has been attained it is recorded in the military registry, so that it is considered by the draft commission and is meritorious if pursuing a military career. Annually, around 25,000–40,000 attain a military speciality through DOSAAF training.[159]

Although the objective of reinstating DOSAAF was initially to ready Russian youth for military service, the focus in pre-draft training has since shifted towards patriotic military education. The clearest example of this is the creation in 2016 of the Russian patriotic youth movement, *Yunarmiia*, which soon became one of the largest youth movements in Russia, organising patriotic events for children aged 8–17. These events allude to Russian cultural and historical legacy, and include the organising of summer camps.[160] In terms of the number of participating children and adolescents, the organisation has grown rapidly from 283,000 participants in 2018 to more than 600,000 in 2019, and 1,251,000 in 2022.[161]

The number of young Russians with either a military speciality obtained in the DOSAAF organisation, or with experience from *Yunarmiia*, who are called up for compulsory military service is constantly increasing. For example, during the spring draft in 2019, almost 20 percent of those drafted had obtained a military speciality prior to the draft, and almost 2000 were former *Yunarmiia* members.[162]

The increasing role for organisations such as *Yunarmiia* is merely one example of how Russian patriotism has become more militarized in both content and expression.[163] Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the MoD, in cooperation with patriotic organisations, has arranged military-patriotic rallies at an ever increasing scale, as well as constructed buildings, parks and landmarks that allude to Russian orthodoxy, the Great Patriotic War and patriotism writ large. This includes, for example, the creation of the massive *Park Patriot* outside Moscow and, out in the Russian regions, similar, smaller, parks for recreation and military patriotic ceremonies.

In December 2018, the provisions for instilling patriotic sentiments and ideological loyalty within the rank and file of the armed forces was strengthened considerably by the creation of the Main Military-political Directorate.[164] Based on the Soviet model of political commissaries, the creation of the directorate ensued in the reinstating of political officers in army ranks, and tied the youth and

[159] *RIA Novosti* 2016 & Gavrilov 2017.
[160] Redstar 2019.
[161] VKR 2019a:12–13; Redstar 2019; President of Russia 2022g.
[162] MoD 2019c.
[163] See, for example, Mitikka & Zavadskaya 2021, for an outline of how patriotism in Russia has evolved during the course of the 2010s.
[164] Stepovoi *et al.* 2018.

pre-draft military patriotic organisations closer to the military-political work done in military units.[165]

Military boarding schools

Russia has a long tradition of military secondary education boarding schools, of which the Suvorov Military Schools and the Nakhimov Naval School are the most well-known.[166] Like all parts of the military educational system, the network of military boarding schools was affected by restructuring and optimisation during the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, but in contrast to the reduction of higher military education institutions, it was expanded.

In 2008, the first President Cadet School was formed, adding to the already existing network of military boarding schools, and with the final objective of running at least one military boarding school in each of the federal regions. Fifteen military boarding schools, altogether encompassing 7500 pupils in 2012, grew to twenty-eight in 2022, with a total of 16,000 pupils.[167]

The motive for expanding the military boarding schools was not primarily to improve the recruitment base for the Armed Forces, but rather to provide better educational options for children in families where parents serve in the Armed Forces.[168] For this reason, all boarding schools have extended the length of education to seven years, and in 2009 girls were entitled to enrol.[169] Nonetheless, upon graduation, almost 90 percent enrol in higher military education.[170]

Contract recruitment

Pre-draft training, and to some extent military boarding schools, has not only become ever more important for recruiting sound and motivated draftees for conscription, but also because former conscripts constitute the main pool from which contract soldiers are recruited. Thus, the individual's experience of the compulsory service, as well as the quality of conscript education, matters greatly for increasing the number of servicemen serving under a contract.

Recruitment of contract servicemen is not limited to those who recently finished conscription, but rather extends to all who are placed in the military reserve. Thus, the pool of potential contract recruits is large, and to a higher extent encompasses individuals who have obtained a civilian secondary, vocational, or university, degree.

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[165] Redstar 2019.
[166] In a more direct translation from Russian, these are called "pre-university education institutes of the ministry of defence" (*dovuzovskie uchebnye zavedeniia Ministerstvo oborony*).
[167] For a list of military boarding schools, see MoD homepage 2023a; *Telekanal Zvezda* 2022.
[168] Gavrilov 2009a.
[169] Gavrilov 2009b.
[170] MoD 2018b.

At the same time, the age span of potential recruits is much broader, and longer time has generally passed since they ended their compulsory service. This urged the MoD, in 2012, to establish a four-week long repetition training course for new contract recruits; see Fact Box 6. This was not only introduced as a means to revise military skills among the new recruits, but also to serve as a way to filter out unwanted or unfit individuals.[171]

Even though contract military service in itself has improved the MoD's outlook for recruiting individuals with civilian degrees, the large group of talented young Russians studying at civilian universities has been hard to reach because of generous grounds for deferment due to civilian studies. Although some of the grounds for suspension or postponement of compulsory military service have become less generous, abolishing them has likely not been an option, as that would probably make this group shun a future military career.

Fact Box 6 ─ Combined-arms crash course for contract military service

The purpose of the course is to verify whether the candidate complies with the requirements for military service under a contract. The four-week-long course (192 hours), with training six days a week, includes basic knowledge in first aid for soldiers, handling of a personal weapon, how to orientate using a map, and fieldwork (to ready a personal trench). During the course, the candidate shall also pass the basic norms of CBRN protection, shooting skills and physical training.

Depending on military position, the candidate can also be required to undergo a three- to five-month additional course in order to obtain a specific military speciality.

Source: MoD 2022b.

Appealing to, rather than compelling, the important group of potential recruits with a civilian higher education degree has been a main strategy of the MoD during the 2010s. This is by no means a novelty, as early in the post-Soviet period the MoD had also treated the students enrolled in civilian universities with kid gloves. One example of this was that, in the early 1990s, those with higher education were only allowed to serve for 12 months, instead of the usual 24 months.[172] In recent years, the main approach has been to offer an alternative to mandatory military service by utilising one of the many remnants of the Soviet mass-mobilisation army, the military faculties at civilian universities.

Military faculties at civilian universities played a key role in the Soviet military educational system since the mid-1920s but, in 2008, the network of military faculties at civilian universities was reformed.[173] Their purpose had previously been to train officers among civilian students for placement in the military reserve in order to be able to fill the ranks of cadre units. However, with the abolishment of the mass-mobilisation army, the demand for officers in the reserve was

[171] VKR 2019a:40-41.
[172] VKR 2019a:33.
[173] MoD 2021a:4.

drastically lowered.[174] This resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of military faculties at civilian universities. Although unconventional for Russian military traditions, in 2018 the remaining military faculties started to train regular officers with engineering or technical profiles.[175]

In 2014, the MoD introduced the option, for those eligible for military service but enrolled in a civilian university, of fulfilling their military duty by taking courses to obtain a military speciality concurrently with their ordinary studies.[176] The main novelty was that this was not restricted to officer ranks, but also encompassed the acquiring of military positions corresponding to private (seaman), or NCO, ranks. Of the total of 68 civilian universities where there was a military faculty, 66 now offered this choice.[177]

Upon finishing the military courses, the student is considered to have fulfilled their military obligation and is included in the military reserve. Thus, with this system, the student does not have to suspend their civilian education and, more importantly to the armed forces, is also eligible for applying to serve in the armed forces under a contract in practically all ranks; soldiers, NCOs and officers.

The opportunity to fulfil the military obligation in parallel with civilian studies has become popular, and in 2016 altogether 4900 students, enrolled in 37 different civilian universities, graduated with the rank of private or sergeant.[178] In 2021, there were about 60,000 students enrolled in a total of 96 military centres or faculties.[179]

Fact Box 7 – Education in military faculties

The education to acquire a military speciality during civilian studies consists of two stages.

The first stage is a theoretical course, whose length depends on military rank:

- Soldier/seaman training covers three semesters and encompasses 270 hours.
- NCO (sergeant) rank covers four semesters and encompasses 360 hours.

The second stage of military training, for all ranks, is a practical course organised by the local military commissariat and preceded by a medical examination. This one-month-long course, located at a military garrison, includes field training and encompasses 144 hours.

Lastly, a commission decides whether the student has passed the requirements for the military specialty, upon which they are then placed in the reserve. If the student is either expelled from the university or is not approved by the commission, he is required to undergo compulsory military service.

Source: MoD 2021a & MoD educational brochure p. 21–22.

[174] Alekhin 2007.
[175] *Tass* 2018a.
[176] Redstar 2021.
[177] VKR 2019a:42.
[178] MoD educational brochure, p. 31.
[179] MoD 2021d:7.

Since 2014, those who have obtained a post-secondary degree and are still subject to compulsory military service have been given the choice of either doing 12 months of compulsory military service or serving for 24 months under a contract. The latter option of signing a contract has become ever more popular. In 2018, around 3000 chose to sign a 2-year contract instead of doing compulsory service in the Central Military District, which was a doubling in comparison with 2017.[180] For those approaching the age of 28, but who have not yet served and do not want to sign a contract, the right to demand a summons for a pre-draft medical examination has also been strengthened.[181] One reason why obtaining a military speciality and fulfilling the military obligation has become more attractive is that, since January 2014, fulfilling the military obligation has been mandatory if the student wants to pursue a public-servant career.[182]

The evolution of the rejuvenated use of the military faculties at civilian universities has continued. In 2018, military training centres and military faculties at civilian universities were unified into one organisation; i.e., military educational centres.[183]

Dealing with draft evaders and "refuseniks"

Intentionally evading the draft and desertion were massive challenges for the armed forces during the 1990s and most of the 2000s. The well-known existence of abuse and hazing at the garrisons and the fear of being sent off to Chechnya not only scared off young Russian men but also appalled parents, who went to great lengths to protect their sons from the horrors of military service. The practice of avoiding military service was so widespread that it had its own lingo; where "uklonist" refers to draft evaders, "SOCh" refers to those who unlawfully leave their unit, while "otkaznik" (usually translated as "refuseniks," in English) refers to those who resist draft, mobilisation, or deployment, based on conscientious objection.[184]

The magnitude of draft evasion made it not merely a disciplinary problem but also resulted in a substantial depletion of the recruitment base. The all-time high for draft evasion in the post-Soviet period occurred in 1999, the year the Second Chechen War commenced, when more than 44,000 failed to heed the call-up.[185] As shown in Figure 6, the numbers of draft evaders decreased in the 2000s to around 10,000–20,000 annually. The peak figures in 2009–11 are most likely related to the substantially increased number of those drafted during this period, due to the shortened conscription length. Hence, individuals who, healthwise, were

[180] *Tass* 2018c.
[181] VKR 2019a:42.
[182] MoD educational brochure, p. 10.
[183] *Tass* 2018a.
[184] Argumenty i Fakty 2019.
[185] *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* 2008.

fit, but unmotivated, were likely drafted to a greater extent during these years. In spite of the rather large number of draft evaders, very few were prosecuted for eluding the government-imposed military obligation.[186]

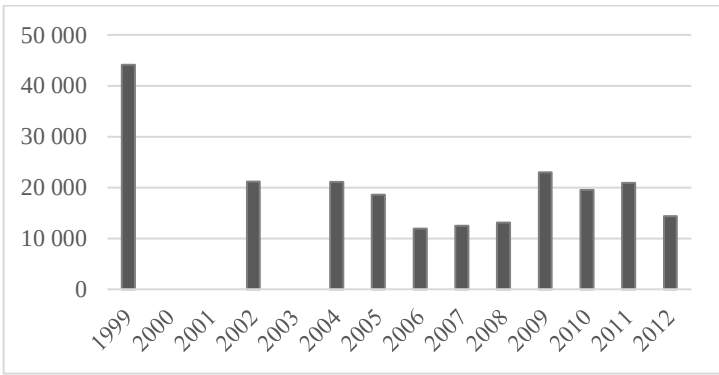

Figure 6 – Number of draft evaders, 1999–2012.

Sources: *Rossiiskaia Gazeta* 2008; *Tass* 2013; *Tass* 2014.

In 2012, the MoD became much more restrictive in revealing figures that made the armed forces look bad. Actually, the fact that the MoD has stopped revealing numbers of draft evaders is most likely indicative of not having been successful in further lowering these numbers. Harsher measures to fight draft evasion have also been put in place, first, in 2017, when a new law was proposed that obliged the military commissariats to record draft evaders in the military registry and expressly restrict them from holding governmental positions for ten years.[187] Although dodging the draft falls under the criminal code and is primarily the responsibility of the local police the Military Police has been assigned by the MoD to take on the tasks of returning conscripts who unlawfully leave their units, and seeking for draft evaders, sometimes by conducting special drives, called *Beglets* (Eng. "fugitive").[188]

Nonetheless, draft evasion has continued to be a persistent problem and in 2020 the Investigative Committee of Russia reported an increase of 70 percent compared to the preceding year.[189]

A more inclusive military organisation

In addition to the efforts to improve the qualifications, the MoD has taken measures to better accommodate women and foreigners who want to serve in the

[186] Ibid.
[187] Gavrilov 2017; VKR 2019b:63.
[188] MoD 2017b.
[189] Investigative Committee of Russia 2020.

Russian Armed Forces, and to adapt the military organisation to be better aligned with some of the more specific needs or interests of Russian youth.

Russian women have a long history of service, or being employed, in the armed forces, which goes back to Tsarist Russia, as well as the Soviet Union and, if anything, the share of women in military service has increased in post-Soviet times. Whereas women stood for less than 5 percent of the Soviet armed forces personnel in 1985, their numbers grew substantially until 1995, when there were approximately 350,000 women in service.[190] In spite of the large manpower reduction during the second half of the 1990s, there were still approximately 115,000 women in military service in the early 2000s, which constituted 9.5 per cent of the total number of military servicemen.[191] As noted earlier, this was largely due to professionalisation and the fact that many NCO positions were found in either the military's rear services (military logistics) or the military administration.

The current number of women serving in uniform is significantly less, due to the intensified striving to recruit contract soldiers to predominantly combat units. In 2020, there were more than 41,000 women serving in uniform, of whom 4000 served in an officer position.[192] This is a slight reduction from 2018, when there were 44,500 female military servicemen.[193] The current share of women in uniformed service is likely around 4.0–4.5 percent.[194]

Competition among young Russian women to enter military higher education is nonetheless high. In fact, the competition among programmes open for women to enrol is significantly higher than the ones with exclusively male admission. In 2020, there were 1150 women enrolled in military higher education. Although this is a slight drop since 2018, of 1300 female students, it is still substantially higher than 2015, when merely 700 women were enrolled in military schools.

Although most positions are not available to women, since 2017 the MoD has seemingly intensified its efforts to open up military service for women. In 2017, the first female ever to commence training to become a fighter pilot enrolled in the Krasnodar Higher Aviation School of Pilots, and one year later female applicants were accepted to enrol for the first time in the Strategic Missile Forces Military Academy, and, in 2020, the first all-female naval crew began its training to man a Black Sea Fleet Raptor-class patrol boat.[195]

According to Russian law, it has been possible since at least 1998 to serve as a foreigner under a contract in the Russian Armed Forces. Military service is

[190] Rykov 2000.
[191] Ibid.
[192] *Strazh Baltiki* 2020:1.
[193] *RIA Novosti* 2018.
[194] Based on the assessment of total military manpower of 963,000, in 2020, provided in Table 2 in Chapter 4.
[195] MoD 2017a; *Izvestiia* 2018; *Tass* 2020.

restricted to foreigners of 18–30 years of age and, in addition to requirements that apply to Russian citizens, they must be fluent in Russian and sign a 5-year contract.[196] However, the number of foreign servicemen who have chosen to serve in the Russian army has been few, around 100 individuals at any given time, and mostly citizens from the member states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).[197]

In early 2015, a presidential decree further detailed under what circumstances foreigners can serve in the Russian Armed Forces. It is likely that the new decree was tailormade in order to attract Ukrainian citizens sympathetic to Russia. In another decree adopted at the same time, Crimean residents who had served in the Ukrainian Armed Forces were recognised by the Russian authorities and thereby exempted from compulsory service in Russia.[198] In 2019, the option to serve in the Russian Armed Forces was restricted to one contract period. In order to serve a second, the foreigner had to become a Russian citizen.[199]

Also worth mentioning is the forming in 2013 of special sport and science companies, wherein promising sportsmen can continue to pursue elite sport and youths interested in technology can fulfil their mandatory service without having to give up their ambitions.

The number of sport and science companies has gradually increased. In 2022, there were 17 science companies, of which eight were tied to the military innovation centre (technopolis), "Era," located in the city of Anapa, on the Black Sea coast; and five sport companies.[200] The forming of these companies was described early on as a part of the effort to "humanise" military service by better adapting mandatory military service to the needs and wishes of the youth, but their formation has allegedly also contributed to increasing the prestige of military service as a whole.[201] In early 2022, there were around 650 conscripts enrolled in a science company, and around 400 enrolled in sports companies.[202]

While the scientific results from the conscripted science companies and the Era innovation centre are likely modest, it is probable that they are used primarily as a way to identify and subsequently recruit particularly talented young Russians to more serious military scientific institutions and design bureaus. This is even more the case with the third type of special companies for conscripts formed in 2015, that is, the scientific-production companies, of which there were a total of four in 2022, each tied to a specific company formation within the Russian military-industrial complex.[203]

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[196] *Tass* 2015.
[197] Ibid.
[198] *Interfax* 2015.
[199] *Kommersant* 2019.
[200] MoD 2022a.
[201] Zibrov *et al.* 2018.
[202] *Tass* 2021.
[203] MoD 2015b; MoD 2022a.

5.2 Appeal and prestige of military service

Public antipathy toward the state-mandated military service goes back to the Soviet war in Afghanistan and was intensified during the 1990s, mainly due to poor conditions in the garrisons and Russia's wars in Chechnya. Deaths of conscripts were an issue that had the potential to spur anti-regime sentiments in public opinion.[204] During the 1996 presidential election campaign, and in an effort to boost public ratings, Boris Yeltsin promised to abolish the feared and loathed conscription, if re-elected.[205] Although Yeltsin won the election, the harsh economic situation and the outbreak of the Second Chechen War in August 1999 made it impossible to fulfil the promise.

The radical decrease of compulsory military service length in 2006–08, when facing severe demographic challenges, can seem militarily irrational, especially considering that the Federal Target Programme, which was aimed to increase the number of contract soldiers substantially in the years 2004–07, had largely failed. However, the issue of how conscripts were treated had remained a sensitive one in Russian society and by significantly shortening the service length and improving the conditions of service, potential political risks regarding conscription were neutralised. As former conscripts also constituted the main pool from which contract soldiers were to be recruited from, the service conditions of the year-long mandatory military service also had to become substantially better in order not to miss the recruitment targets.

The next section outlines strategies that the MoD has pursued over the course of the last 15 years to improve service conditions in order to facilitate recruitment and retention in the Armed Forces.

Hazing and *dedovshchina*

As noted above, conscription in post-Soviet Russia had always been associated with massive social problems, especially the common practice of abuse in different forms. Already in the final years of the Soviet Union, the widespread existence of hazing, or *dedovshchina*, within the armed forces had been pointed out in particular by the Committee of Soldiers´ Mothers.[206]

The shortening of compulsory service from 24 to 12 months was a measure directly aimed at supressing *dedovshchina*, the rationale being that it would eliminate the difference between conscripts who were serving either their first or second year. Since Soviet times, a violent military culture had developed, where soldiers serving their second year were known as the "*dedy*" (i.e., "grandfathers"). The *dedy* harassed freshmen, stole from them and made them obey their commands.

[204] See, for example, Elkner 2004 for an analysis of the political potential of the grieving mothers of soldiers.
[205] HRW 2002.
[206] Elkner 2004.

There was likely an expectation that the shortened service length would automatically improve the situation of the conscripts. However, the culture proved more difficult to root out. Further efforts to improve the situation of conscript soldiers and minimise the risk of *dedovshchina* as part of the "humanisation of military service" were initiated during the Serdiukov/Makarov reform. This included a new system of handling allowances, introduced in 2014, in which each conscript received their payments on a personal bank card instead of cash, thereby lessening the risk of extortion.[207]

Military prosecutors have also become increasingly more active in not only prosecuting conscripts for crimes committed but also in protecting their rights, with phone hotlines to military prosecutors installed in garrisons.[208] However, even though things have likely improved considerably, neither disciplinary problems nor *dedovshchina* have been fully eliminated in the armed forces. A notable example of this from 2019 that made international headlines was a mass shooting in an Eastern Military District unit that resulted in the deaths of eight military servicemen. The shooter, a 20-year-old conscript, had been the victim of extensive hazing prior to the shooting.[209]

High suicide rates among servicemen were, together with a high number of draft dodgers and persons unlawfully leaving their units, a symptom of hazing in the military garrisons. In the first half of the 2000s, there were consistently around 1000 deaths annually, only among conscripts, but only a few percentage points were officially linked to hazing. [210] However, consistently through the 2000s, around 25–30 percent of the annual military deaths were suicides; thus, there is reason to believe that many of these were in reality hidden cases of *dedovshchina*.[211]

According to the MoD, in 2010 the armed forces intensified its efforts at suicide prevention, and was thereby able to decrease their numbers substantially, starting in 2011.[212] In recent years, though, it has become harder to assess the number of army suicides, partly because of the unwillingness to reveal figures that provide a negative picture of the armed forces, but also due to the 2015 presidential decree that forbids disclosure of military deaths in peacetime.[213]

A tender from a Russian insurance company, shown graphically in Figure 7, disclosed the total number of military deaths for 2012–16. Included in these figures are all deaths regardless of reason, i.e., accidents, sickness, suicides, killed in

[207] *Tass* 2014.
[208] Dasehevskii 2019.
[209] *Lenta* 2020.
[210] *RIA Novosti* 2007.
[211] In 2005 and 2010, the percentage of suicides among the total military deaths was around 27 and 30 percent, respectively. See *RBK Group* 2005 & Ivanov 2011.
[212] Ivanov 2011.
[213] *RBK Group* 2015.

action (KIAs), etc. According to these figures, military deaths in 2008–16 were substantially lower than the early 2000s, when military deaths were constantly above 1000 per year.

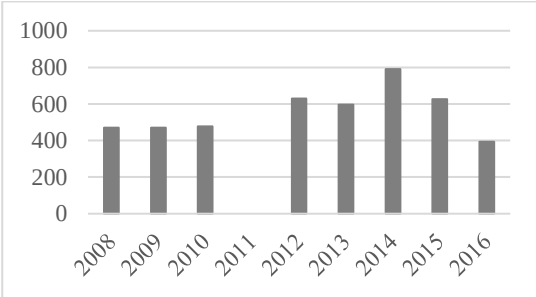

Figure 7 – Deaths in the armed forces, 2008–16 (2011 missing).

Source: Nikolskii & Terchenko 2017.

For most of 2008–16, military deaths remained around 500–600 per year. The increase from 2012 is possibly related to intensified training, thereby leading to an increase in training-related accidents. The peaks in 2014, and perhaps 2015, are likely a result of KIAs among the Russian regular troops deployed covertly in Eastern Ukraine. Lacking reliable and detailed figures over the whole period, it is hard to draw rock-hard conclusions regarding the development of the numbers of deaths in the armed forces. However, military death figures have seemingly dropped substantially in comparison with the early 2000s. To some degree, that slightly more people served in the armed forces in the early 2000s, together with the effect of deployments to hot spots in Northern Caucasus, could explain part of this drop, but it is probable that efforts to curb hazing have shown results.

In 2021, MoD officials reported that suicides among conscripts had dropped in the last few years, to nearly zero, but that they saw that the numbers had transitioned over to contract soldiers.[214] However, no figures were revealed and therefore it is hard to assess the current suicide levels among Russian military servicemen.

Low- and mid-level corruption

Closely related to the long-lasting problem of *dedovshchina* in the rank and file of the armed forces is the problem of corruption, which has been widespread and omnipresent in the armed forces, and indeed the Russian society as a whole, for a long time.

Over the last decade (2012–21), corruption in Russia on a societal basis has neither improved nor worsened, according to the Transparency International Corruption

[214] Sushkina 2021.

Perceptions Index (CPI), but firmly occupied a place at the lower end of a list of the world's corrupt countries.[215] Thus, there are good reasons to believe that the level of corruption in the armed forces does not differ substantially from Russian society as a whole.

However, the general picture presented by the MoD, and its affiliated journals, is one where corruption and theft among service members in the armed forces is substantial, but that the problem is constantly decreasing. For example, the number of legal violations of all kinds in the armed forces has, allegedly, diminished steadily during 2010–16, and had halved by 2018, in comparison to prior to the Serdiukov/Makarov reform.[216] The reasons for this are claimed to be the generally improved social conditions in the military.

These accounts should be taken with both one or two grains of salt. Allegations of corruption as a political tool are widely used in Russia, and there are good reasons to believe that this is not limited to the political sphere.[217] Thus, much of actual corruption likely goes unnoticed, while open accusations of corruption sometimes have little merit.

There are nonetheless reasons to believe that corrupt behaviour in the armed forces has become harder to pursue, at least among mid- and low-ranked servicemen. First, the dismantling of the mass-mobilisation structure and much of the Soviet-legacy military support structure during the Serdiukov/Makarov reform years has trimmed the more profitable opportunities for embezzlement.

Second, because of the increasing reliance on voluntary military service, there may be less acceptance of corruption that is conducted by mid- and low-ranked servicemen. Especially when it comes to blackmailing and extortion from superiors and other behaviour that jeopardises the societal view of the Armed Forces.

Third, administrative tasks that earlier were handled by the military units have largely been centralised in order to minimise the risk that military officials at garrisons demand bribes from subordinates. One example of this measure is how distribution of military housing was centralised under the Serdiukov/Makarov tenure.[218] Another is the armed forces personnel directorate, which in 2018 took over the distribution of NCOs once they finished their training.[219]

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[215] In 2021, Russia was ranked in 136th place (on a list of 180), where the least corrupt countries were at the top of the list, and scoring 29 (out of 100), on the CPI; see Transparency International 2021.
[216] Parshakov 2018:88.
[217] One recent example of this was the purge of the entire Baltic Fleet leadership in 2016. Officially, incompetence and corruption was the reason for their being fired, but Russian news media speculated openly that the purge was the result of a conflict between two factions, and that its harsh implementation was to set an example; see Kjellén 2021:21–22.
[218] *Kommersant* 2018.
[219] Stepovoi & Kruglov 2018.

Fourth, the last decade's substantial increases in the salaries and improved social benefits linked to military service have likely made servicemen less prone to the increasingly hazardous endeavour of stealing from the organisation. Hence, it is probable that corruption in the contemporary armed forces is predominately propelled by greed, rather than need, which was likely more the case during the first decade of the post-Soviet period.

Military salaries and social benefits

One of the more important reasons for the increased willingness to sign on for contract military service, as seen throughout the 2010s, is the generally improved salaries and benefits linked to military service.

The system of military pay in Russia is intricate and the amount that each person receives depends in the end on multiple factors. Basic monthly pay for contract soldiers, for example, is determined by salary class (*tarifnyi razriad*) and military rank, but in addition to basic pay there are a plethora of circumstances that grant additional pay. This includes, for example, the number of years of service, whether or not the individual is entrusted to work with information that constitutes state or military secrets, hazardous work (diving, parachuting, demining, etc.), service in remote parts of the Russian Federation, etc.

Under the Serdiukov/Makarov tenure, average salary increased by more than 3.5 times, but from low levels.[220] In the last few years, the MoD has intensified its efforts to ensure that military wages do not fall short in comparison to leading sectors of the Russian economy. From January 2018, a military wage and pension indexation system has been introduced that guarantees an annual indexation of at least 4 percent.[221] By the end of 2018, the Russian defence minister stated that, on average, military wages had reached the same average levels of workers employed in Russia's leading branches of industry.

The system of monetary allowances for conscripts changed in 2012, which introduced a general monthly pay of 2000 roubles. This represented a considerable improvement, and has since increased due to indexation.[222] Upon finishing mandatory service, the conscript is granted a sum corresponding to three monthly salary payments.

One of the more important social benefits of serving in the armed forces, which goes back to not only the Soviet Union but also the Russian empire, is the state's obligation to offer housing for military servicemen and their families.[223] At the time of the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, there was a large deficiency in

[220] *Kommersant* 2018.
[221] MoD 2018a.
[222] Stepovoi & Kruglov 2018.
[223] See Krutin 2017, for a historical depiction of what this right looked like in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation.

military housing, which had accumulated over many years. Hence, there were many servicemen who had fulfilled all the criteria and were thereby entitled to housing provided by the military. Nonetheless, in 2008, merely 33,9 percent of those servicemen entitled to a permanent residence, and 17,6 percent of those entitled to service accommodation, had their right fulfilled.[224]

In order to resolve the housing situation, the MoD launched a building spree in order to be able to provide permanent and service residences to all servicemen who were entitled, including both those in active service and those dismissed or discharged from service. If anything, the need for military housing increased dramatically during the 2010s, due to the increase in the number of servicemen serving under a contract.[225]

In 2005, the Russian government introduced a new way to provide permanent housing to military servicemen, called the Accumulative Mortgage System (*nakopatelno-ipotechnaia sistema*), which has since become the main way for the MoD to offer permanent housing to its servicemen. In short, this is a savings account intended for buying a residence to which the state annually deposits an indexed sum (288400 roubles in 2020), which can be used after three years of service.[226]

Improving conditions in the barracks

The campaign to "humanise military service" initiated during the Serdiukov/Makarov tenure encompassed a whole range of measures intended to improve the conditions for, especially, conscripts. While some were merely symbolic, others had a substantial impact on the lives and service conditions of military servicemen. These included, for example, the exclusion of tasks that were not directly related to combat training; outsourcing cleaning and laundry; offering buffets in military canteens and increasing the nutritional value of the food served; introducing a 5-day training week, with simplified routines for applying for weekend leave; instituting liberal rules regarding the use of cell phones; and offering the possibility of being posted closer to home, etc.[227]

One measure of particular importance, which as far as possible had the effect of allowing conscripts to serve closer to home, was the departure from the long-standing principle of extraterritorial service for conscripts.[228] Hence, the objective of "humanising" military service trumped the concern over whether this would produce ethnically homogenous units. However, the experiment of letting

[224] Redstar 2009.
[225] Revealing the number of new residential buildings built for the MoD has, during the 2010s, become one of the recurring achievements presented by the Russian defence minister at the end of each year. See for example, MoD 2019d.
[226] MoD 2020a.
[227] *Realarmy.org* 2013.
[228] Mikhailov & Voloshin 2013.

conscripts serve closer to home did not last for long, and in 2013 the MoD took the first steps to reinstate the extraterritorial principle, so that the luxury of being able to influence the location of service was restricted to contract servicemen.[229] Nonetheless, contract soldiers in general seemingly prefer to serve in a unit close to where they grew up.

[229] Ibid; Koriakin 2015:94–95.

6 Military mobilisation

With the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform, the mass-mobilisation army was abandoned, with massive consequences for the Ground Forces, with its enormous "skeleton" structure, composed of units with reduced manning as well as cadre units practically dismantled in its entirety. The same destiny faced the bloated organisations designed to support the multi-million man army, including administrative functions, the vast military logistical support organisation, ammunition storage, and military command and control.

The need for thorough reform of the broken Soviet legacy mass-mobilisation structure was so immense that the reform could not be risked by including the creation of a modern mobilisation system. Resistance against reform was so fierce that such a pursuit would inevitably lead to the survival of obsolete elements. Hence, the old structure had to be crushed in its entirety. However, it was never a question of there being no contingencies when Russia could be in need of scaling up its military forces. In fact, the revised Military Doctrine of 2010 clearly pictures regional or large-scale wars as the result of an escalatory process under or above the nuclear weapons threshold, as an unlikely but nonetheless real risk to the Russian Federation.[230]

Even though much of the military mobilisation structure was dismantled by Serdiukov/Makarov, the legal framework as well as administrative preparations for military mobilisation have been maintained. The main MoD document that sets out the provisions for military mobilisation is the mobilisation plan (MP), which has been revised four times in the post-Soviet period and is distinguished by the year it entered in force. The first (MP-93) was the first mobilisation plan of the Russian Federation and replaced its Soviet antecedent; the second (MP-00) revision was developed due to the gradual decline in manpower that had occurred during the 90s; the third (MP-10) was adopted to reflect the 'New Look' Armed organisation; and the fourth (MP-15) was likely adopted due to the introduction of 'reservists,' i.e. those doing reserve service under a contract.[231]

This chapter seeks to outline how the capability of the Russian Armed Forces to mobilise has developed since the Serdiukov/Makarov reform, and what this capability looks like in 2023. Although, the notion of "mobilisation" can entail several different meanings in the security context, it is here strictly restricted to the potential for the armed forces to scale up forces from standing, peacetime levels. Hence, neither intangible perceptions, such as the "mobilisation" of a will to fight

[230] See articles 7 & 8a in the 2010 Military Doctrine (President of Russia 2010).
[231] RVO 2019:40.

or patriotic sentiments, nor the comprehensive effort to move the entire Russian state and economy onto a war footing is considered here.[232]

6.1 The reserve

For the purpose of military mobilisation, Russian citizens who have completed compulsory military service are transferred to the mobilisable reserve (*zapas*).[233] Although this group constitutes the greater part, there are also other ways to enter the reserve. Examples of such alternatives are officers who have left the armed forces in pursuit of a civilian career, students who have obtained a military speciality training at a military faculty in parallel with their civilian studies, and those who have finished alternative service. As of September 2022, there were around 25 million Russian citizens placed in the military reserve.[234]

Participation in the military reserve is compulsory and, as outlined in Table 3, age in combination with military rank determines when each person is relieved from participation in the reserve. Citizens partaking in the military reserve belong to either of three categories (*razdiady*), depending on age and rank. The youngest belong to the first category but are with time successively transferred over to the second and third categories, with lower likelihood of being called up in times of mobilisation.[235]

Table 3 – Call-up order from the reserve during mobilisation.

Military Ranks	**Age of citizens in the reserve**		
	First Group	Second Group	Third Group
Men			
Soldiers & NCOs	Up to 35 years	Up to 45 years	Up to 50 years
Junior officers	Up to 50 years	Up to 55 years	Up to 60 years
Senior officers*	Up to 55 years	Up to 60 years	Up to 65 years
Colonels	Up to 60 years	Up to 65 years	-
Supreme officers	Up to 65 years	Up to 70 years	-
Women			
Non-officers	-	-	Up to 45 years
Officers	-	-	Up to 50 years

Source: Koriakin 2015:83.

Each service member in the reserve can either be predestined for service in a specific unit or be generally available for replacement operations.[236] The disbandment of all

[232] See, for example, Monaghan (2016) and Cooper (2016), for a more comprehensive approach to the mobilisation notion.
[233] Among Russian conscripts, leaving the military is commonly known as "demobilization" ("*Dembel*," or its abbreviation, "*DMB*," are also used).
[234] *Rossiiskaia gazeta* 2022.
[235] Koriakin 2015: 83.
[236] Kruglov 2018.

cadre and partially reduced units of the Ground Forces during the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform has likely increased the latter category at the expense of the former, but higher-ranking officers of the reserve are still likely to have a pre-destined position in a mobilisation.[237] The rank of a citizen placed in the military reserve can change over time, for example due to having finished a civilian secondary or tertiary degree, or as a result of being assigned to a specific position.[238]

Call-up from the reserve, i.e. mobilisation, can be either general or partial, where the latter can be either territorially or organisationally delimited.[239] Citizens can be exempted from mobilisation call-up on similar grounds to being exempted from call-up for conscription. In addition, public and state companies essential to the war effort, such as the Russian military-industrial complex, have the option to 'book' (*bronirovanie*) key persons in their organisation, thereby exempting them from the call-up.[240]

It is also likely that the central military authorities take into account similar considerations in order to avoid a situation where mobilisation entirely depletes a village or small town of its male population. In December 2022, and after the targets of the partial mobilisation announced in September had allegedly been reached, the defence minister concluded that some 830,000 citizens had, for varied reasons, been exempted during the partial mobilisation.[241]

Organising mobilisation

Military mobilisation in Russia relies essentially on two organisational structures. First, the main Organisation and Mobilisation Directorate within the General Staff (GOMU) has responsibility for planning military mobilisation in Russia.[242] Second, the network of military commissariats located throughout the Russian Federation plays an important role in the more hands-on aspects of preparing for military mobilisation.

One could assume that the dismantling of the Soviet mass-mobilisation system would have lessened the importance of GOMU, but dealing with the matters related to military mobilisation is merely one of several tasks that GOMU is responsible for and also includes overseeing organisational changes and the implementation of new equipment and weapon systems (rearmament) in military units. Indeed, similarly to all administrative functions in the central military apparatus, GOMU's personnel force was substantially decreased during the

[237] Kruglov 2018.
[238] Koriakin 2015:83–84.
[239] Koriakin 2015:294.
[240] Koriakin 2015:300.
[241] President of Russia 2022g.
[242] See GOMU page on the MoD homepage 2023.

Serdiukov/Makarov reform, with nearly a third of its departments liquidated.[243] This and the disbandment of cadre units, however, by no means altered the legal framework for conducting mobilisation, and the work of developing plans for mobilisation purposes has continued.

The numbers of military commissariats, as already mentioned in Section 3.2, were reduced radically during the reform: down 95 percent, from 1600 to 80. Although the remaining military commissariats were larger organisations, their cutback in numbers reflected the lesser focus on mobilisation capabilities following the Serdiukov/Makarov reform. Nevertheless, the military commissariats have retained the task of administering the military reserve registry within the remit of the region they is located in. This includes both citizens who partake in the military reserve, as well as vehicles and other civilian means of transportation.

Similarly, in the federal subjects, the legal framework governing the succession of authority in the event of martial law, from civilian authorities to the military commissioner, was also preserved. Turning the position of military commissioner into a civilian one, in the early 2010s, reflects the low priority given to mobilisation preparation at the time. Military command over military commissariats was resumed, however, in 2021.[244]

Call-ups of citizens in the reserve

Annual reservist call-ups (*voennye sbory*) were organised throughout the post-Soviet period, but the scale likely varied substantially. Call-ups from the military reserve are usually executed during the first half of the year, with January and February being most common.[245]

Reservists are typically called up for either of two reasons, to test the readiness (*proverka boevoi gotovnosti*) of the reserve structure, or to provide those in the reserve with additional training (*uchebnyi sbor*).[246] Citizens placed in the military reserve can be called up once each third year; each call-up normally lasts one month, but may last a maximum three months; while the total time each citizen can be called up from the reserve may not exceed 12 months.[247]

Lately, call-ups of citizens in the reserve have also been increasing during recurring large-scale exercises. For example, during the strategic exercise, Vostok-2018, “a couple of thousand citizens were called up from the reserve” and, in 2019, the Eastern MD conducted its first dedicated mobilisation exercise since its formation (in 2010), mobilising 9500 from the reserve.[248]

[243] Chuvakin 2019.
[244] Kretsul & Lavrov 2020.
[245] *Tass* 2022b.
[246] *Tass* 2022a.
[247] Priemskaia & Cherepanova 2021; *Tass* 2022b.
[248] MoD 2018c & MoD 2020b.

6.2 Reservists

Even though the mass-mobilisation army was dismantled in the early 2010s, the legal framework for the accumulation of a military reserve was preserved. Although this could indicate that the MoD did not fully reject the idea of eventually restoring some mobilisation capabilities, it was its functioning as a recruitment pool for contract soldiers that was the main reason for keeping the military reserve intact.

In November 2013, and after one year of incumbency, defence minister Shoigu revealed in an interview that a decision had been taken to create four "reserve armies"; this was motivated by the fact that the sheer size of the Russian Federation called for well-developed mobilisation capabilities.[249] This, seemingly, provided an official confirmation of the rumour of the return of "skeleton units" that had already been floated in the Russian press during autumn 2012, and well before the ousting of the two officials who were responsible for the dismantling of the mass-mobilisation army, Defence Minister Serdiukov and Chief-of-General Staff Makarov, in November 2012.[250]

Indeed, there was a renewed focus on developing reserve forces in order to improve the capability of the armed forces to scale up its military forces, but it was never a question of the return of Soviet-style mobilisation. The then new defence minister, Sergey Shoigu, relatively inexperienced in military matters, made it sound bigger than it was, probably unintentionally. Instead of four "reserve armies," the MoD formed more modest reservist commands in each of the four Military Districts in order to pave the way for introducing military reservists who were serving under a contract.

The overall priority of the following years continued to be the further development of the standing force, whereas the development of a capacity to scale up the Russian force structure was slow, and merely focused on creating small numbers of territorial defence units.

In December 2012, President Putin signed an amendment to existing laws that somewhat altered the organisation of the military reserve. The main novelty was the distinguishing between the "mobilisable pool of citizens" (*mobilizatsionnyi liudskii resurs*), and "reservists" (*mobilizatsionnyi liudskoi reserve*), both those accumulated and those recruited according to a territorial principle.[251]

Whereas the mobilisable pool of citizens roughly corresponds to the old notion of the military reserve, the introduction of reservists opened up the legal grounds for territorially recruited reservists serving under a contract with the MoD. One main difference between those placed in the reserve and reservists was that, for a call-

[249] *Vesti* 2013.
[250] Mikhailov 2012.
[251] Koriakin 2015:303.

up, the former required a presidential decree, while the latter could be called up at times stipulated by the contract.

In 2013–14, reservist commands (*komandovanie reserve*) were formed – one in each of the four military districts (MDs) – subordinating all military commissariats and equipment storage bases.[252] Examples include the 11th and 12th Reservist Commands of the Western and the Southern MD, respectively.[253] The formation of the reservist commands was likely the first step to introducing the recruitment of reservists on a contract basis. It was first in 2015, however, that the first reservists were recruited and, initially, merely as an experiment. Funding for the experiment was limited to 280 million roubles in 2014, growing to 325 million in 2016, and encompassed the recruitment of merely 5000 reservists.[254]

With very little effort from the MoD's side, in terms of recruitment campaigns, the growth of reservists continued to be modest, even after the reservist experiment had ended in 2016. The focus seems to have been on forming light territorial defence units of predominantly battalion or company size. Such units, when activated, are mainly used for deployment in their home regions for the purpose of protecting critical infrastructure, upholding law and order, and assisting other federal agencies to cope with natural disasters. Nonetheless, call-up of reservists has been conducted regularly during large-scale strategic exercises, for example during Vostok-2018.[255]

In 2017, the MoD took small but significant steps to improve the weaponry and equipment base for mobilisation purposes by starting to form the first Mobilisation Deployment Support Centres (*Tsentra obespecheniia mobilizatsionnogo razvertyvaniia, TsOMR*), which were tasked with the responsibility for long-term storage and conservation of military equipment.[256] The process of forming Mobilisation Support Centres has been a lengthy one, as in the case, for example, of the formation of the Southern MD, in 2019.[257] This coincided with a decision to revise the massive destruction programme, ongoing since 2011 and envisioned as being completed by 2020, in which 5000 combat vehicles and 5000 main battle tanks were intended to be scrapped.[258] Although many had already been scrapped, the MoD managed to prevent the destruction of 6000 combat vehicles and battle tanks. It is probable that the MoD also revised similar destruction programmes of other types of ground forces equipment and weaponry, such as artillery, air defence and military engineering equipment.

[252] Mikhailov 2016.
[253] MoD 2014a; MoD 2014b.
[254] *RIA Novosti* 2015; Kozhina 2014.
[255] MoD 2018c.
[256] VKR 2019:288.
[257] MoD 2019a.
[258] Nikolskii 2017.

BARS – The Combat Army Reserve of the Country

By 2020, Russia had over the course of eight years taken several formal steps in order to rebuild a capability of scaling up its military force structure, but the results had been surprisingly meagre. Although the numbers are not shared by the Russian MoD, the total number of reservists likely did not exceed 25,000 and was predominantly organised as light territorial defence units. Seemingly, this was about to change when the MoD launched a massive reservist recruitment campaign, called "BARS" – the Combat Army Reserve of the Country (Ru. *Boevoi Armeiskii Rezerv Strany*). In retrospect, however, this was not the MoD laying the groundwork for a modern Russian mobilisation capability, but rather invasion preparations done five minutes to midnight.

According to Russian media, the target of the BARS campaign was to recruit at least 50–53,000 reservists, but the actual intention seems to have been to recruit as many as possible.[259] Recruitment efforts were directed towards those already in the reserve and who had not yet turned 42 by offering allowances, such as a sign-on bonus and a monthly pay, depending on rank and position, of 3000–8000 roubles.[260]

In the Southern MD, the target was set on recruiting 38,000 reservists, but although there had been successes in recruiting reservists from especially the Cossack community, the target was not anywhere close to being met when Russia commenced its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[261] In the Central MD, around 9000 BARS reservists were recruited in 2021.[262]

[259] Mukhin 2021.
[260] *Na Strazhe Zapoliaria* 2021:8.
[261] *Vesti* 2021.
[262] Gavrilov 2022.

7 Conclusions

Prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the conventional wisdom said that in the event of a war, the decade-long modernisation of the Russian armed forces would eventually but inevitably lead to Moscow's victory. The unfolding of the war since February 2022 shows that this has not at all been the case. How then can *Russian military manning explain the difficulties that have faced its armed forces during the first year of the "special military operation" in Ukraine?*

The attempts to explain Russian military shortcomings have roughly followed two lines. The first is that Russia's modernisation of its armed forces has simply been hugely overstated, and is really the Potemkin village of today's Russia. The second line does not target the armed forces per se, but instead focuses on external circumstances that have caused its demise. This includes, for example, an apparent absence of military leadership in both the planning and initial execution of the invasion, and the massive military aid provided to Ukraine from Western countries. Although both these types of explanations have some merit, I argue that there is a third way, based on the findings in this report, that better explains the shortcomings of Russia's armed forces during its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This third explanation is that Russia's armed forces has not been designed to wage the type of war that Russia's full-scale invasion has become.

The dismantling of the mass-mobilisation army

At first glance, it is easy to get the impression that Russia's thorough military reform following the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 was about restoring military capabilities that had rusted away in the 1990s. This is true when it comes to the modernisation force structures associated with high-readiness and substantial peacetime engagement, such as the Naval Forces, Strategic Missile Forces, Air Defence Forces, the Air Force, and the Airborne Troops. Modernisation has indeed resulted in both a resumed permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean Sea, and strategic bombers are once again deployed on long-range patrols. Hence, the technical modernisation in these branches and arms of services has merely entailed the substitution of Soviet weapon systems with modern equivalents, and organisational restructuring has not entailed radical shifts from Soviet times.

The modernisation of the Ground Forces, the military educational system, the rear (logistics) services, and all other functions that constituted and were dimensioned according to the needs of the Soviet mass-mobilisation system, went in the completely opposite direction. Instead of restoring the capability to raise and support a multi-million man army for conventional warfare in Europe, all of the still-existing remnants of that mass-mobilisation structure were finally dismantled, and in its place a small, high-readiness, professional force with practically no potential to scale up its force structure was created.

Here lies perhaps Moscow's self-deception. With the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the sprawling patriotic sentiments that followed, the armed forces was coated in red flags and Soviet trinkets, and endowed with the honorifics of WWII Soviet Red Army units. This perhaps led the Russian political leadership to believe that it had resurrected and created a modern version of the Soviet armed forces. Although often linked with Soviet regalia, Russia's new military was not the same at all. They were designed for swift deployments, such as Crimea 2014, Syria 2015, Nagorno-Karabakh 2020, and Kazakhstan 2022, and not for a protracted large-scale conventional war in central Europe.

Professionals in lack of military professionalism?

It was not only the overall structure that changed when the Serdiukov/Makarov military reform commenced around 2009, but also the conditions for serving in the armed forces. The depravity and brutality that had infested the armed forces throughout the post-Soviet period were for the first time addressed in a serious manner. The measures employed were not limited to merely increased efforts to fight the rot within the system, but rather to stymie their very foundations. The 24-month conscription was halved in order to quench hazing in the barracks, which had largely been upheld by idleness and the accentuated difference between freshmen serving their first year and the *stariki*, serving their second year. Similarly, by the dismantling of the mass-mobilisation system, many of the opportunities for corruption offered by the obsolete military bureaucracy and bloated military logistical system were removed. Simultaneously, salaries and social benefits increased, and service became more meaningful through increased and intensified training and stronger focus on soldier proficiency. This transformation has also resulted in both an increased willingness to serve as well as an improved societal view of the armed forces.

Against this backdrop it is hard to understand why Russian soldiers once again resemble the ill-disciplined, mistreated and unmotivated bands deployed to Chechnya in the '90s, far from the image of professionalism the Russian MoD has sought to cultivate. Ukraine's characterisation of the Russian soldiers as "orcs," both incompetent and brutal, has gained a strong foothold and is supported by both the weak performance of Russia's armed forces in general as well as the mounting evidence of atrocities and cruelties committed by regular Russian soldiers. One common reaction to this among Russian pundits has been to admit that Moscow has been successful in pulling the wool over the outside world about Russia's military modernisation and, as a part of its penance, all alleged successes of the Russian military reform are being questioned. This is unfortunate, as it could lead to an underestimation of the Russian armed forces and its capability to recover from its initial failures.

As noted earlier, the most important factor to explain the predicaments of Russia's armed forces in Ukraine is that it was handed a task that it was neither cut out nor

properly prepared for. Indeed, that atrocities and war crimes are being committed by Russian soldiers does signal that poor discipline and an appalling military culture still exist within its ranks. Although distress among the Russian troops could account for some of the atrocities committed by Russian forces in the streets of urban areas, the unlawful killings of prisoners of war, systematic looting, rape, and sexual violence cannot.

Future military manning in Russia

One year of war in Ukraine has decimated the Russian Armed Forces, especially its land forces, in a way that is unprecedented in not only the post-Soviet but perhaps also in the post-war period. Even the most conservative assessments of Russia's irretrievable combat losses are in the tens of thousands, and this entails professional soldiers and officers alone. Not only has the MoD committed to rebuilding this force, but also announced a substantial increase of the armed forces in the years 2023–26, encompassing an increase in manpower up to 1.5 million men, of which nearly 700,000 will be contract soldiers.

To rebuild this force is, for several reasons, a monumental task for the MoD. Firstly, beginning around 2016 and thereafter, the MoD has faced substantial challenges in increasing the number of contract soldiers above 400,000. To alter this, salaries and social benefits will have to improve substantially vis-à-vis civilian career paths. Secondly, military recruitment on a voluntary basis will also become much more difficult due to the ongoing war. As casualties mount, the war is creeping closer to an ever increasing number of Russian citizens, which also increases the general awareness of its lethality. Third, the outlook for increasing the number of conscripts is also grim due to the historically small cohort of Russian men who are or will be turning 18, thereby becoming eligible for conscription. In the short term, the recently announced gradual shift in the range of the conscription age, from 18–27 to 21–30 years, will make increasing the number of conscripts even more difficult.

Supposing that Russia would manage to reconstitute its armed forces up to pre-invasion manning levels, or even increase the overall number up to 1.5 million men, it would nonetheless likely entail challenges for the Russian leadership. Their refraining from deploying conscripts to Ukraine, even though manpower shortages were extremely dire during 2022, suggests that Moscow still recalls the Russian society's sensitivity to casualties during the two Chechen Wars. While increased repression and propaganda could likely shift the breaking-point for societal acceptance of the war, Moscow will likely tread lightly as, step by step, it further involves the Russian society into the war.

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